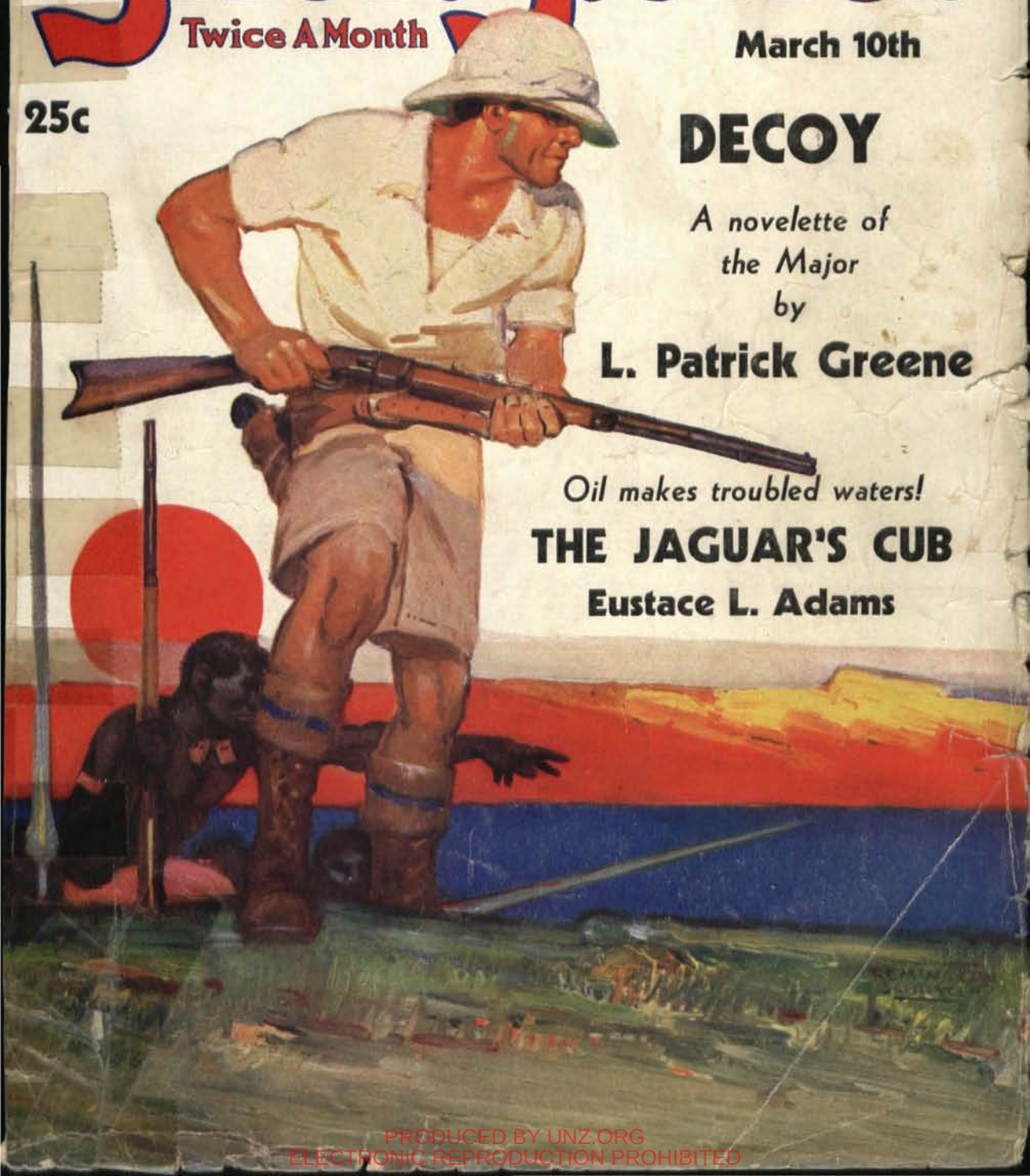
Headliners all in this issue: JAMES B. HENDRYX
FRANK H. SPEARMAN — F. R. PIERCE — B. E. COOK

Short Stories

Twice A Month

March 10th

25c



DECOY

A novelette of the Major
by
L. Patrick Greene

Oil makes troubled waters!

THE JAGUAR'S CUB

Eustace L. Adams

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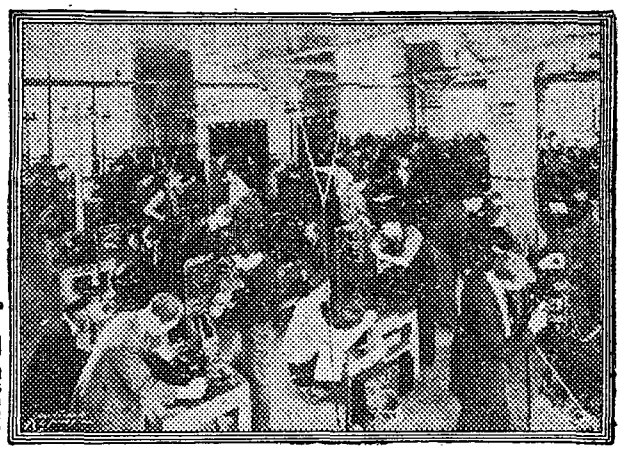

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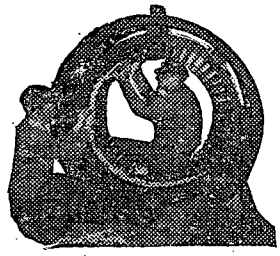

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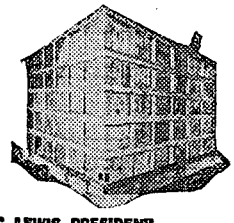

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29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
...5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
...6.00-16	3.75	1.45
...6.00-17	3.40	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
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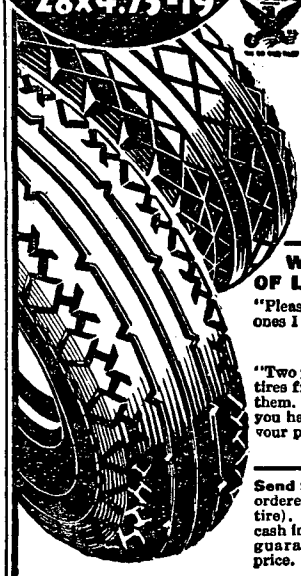

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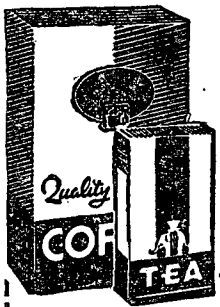

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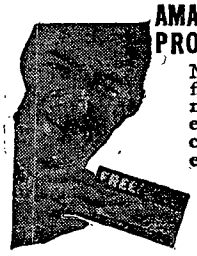

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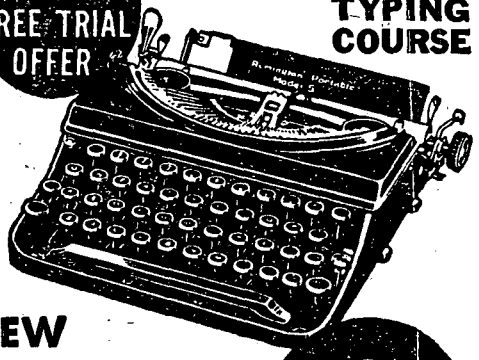

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BIGGEST AND BEST—ACTION

Short

TWICE A MONTH

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ADVENTURE, THRILLS, MYSTERY

Stories

HARRY E. MAULE, *EDITOR*

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MARCH 10th, 1935

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Vol. CL, No. 5 — Whole No. 701

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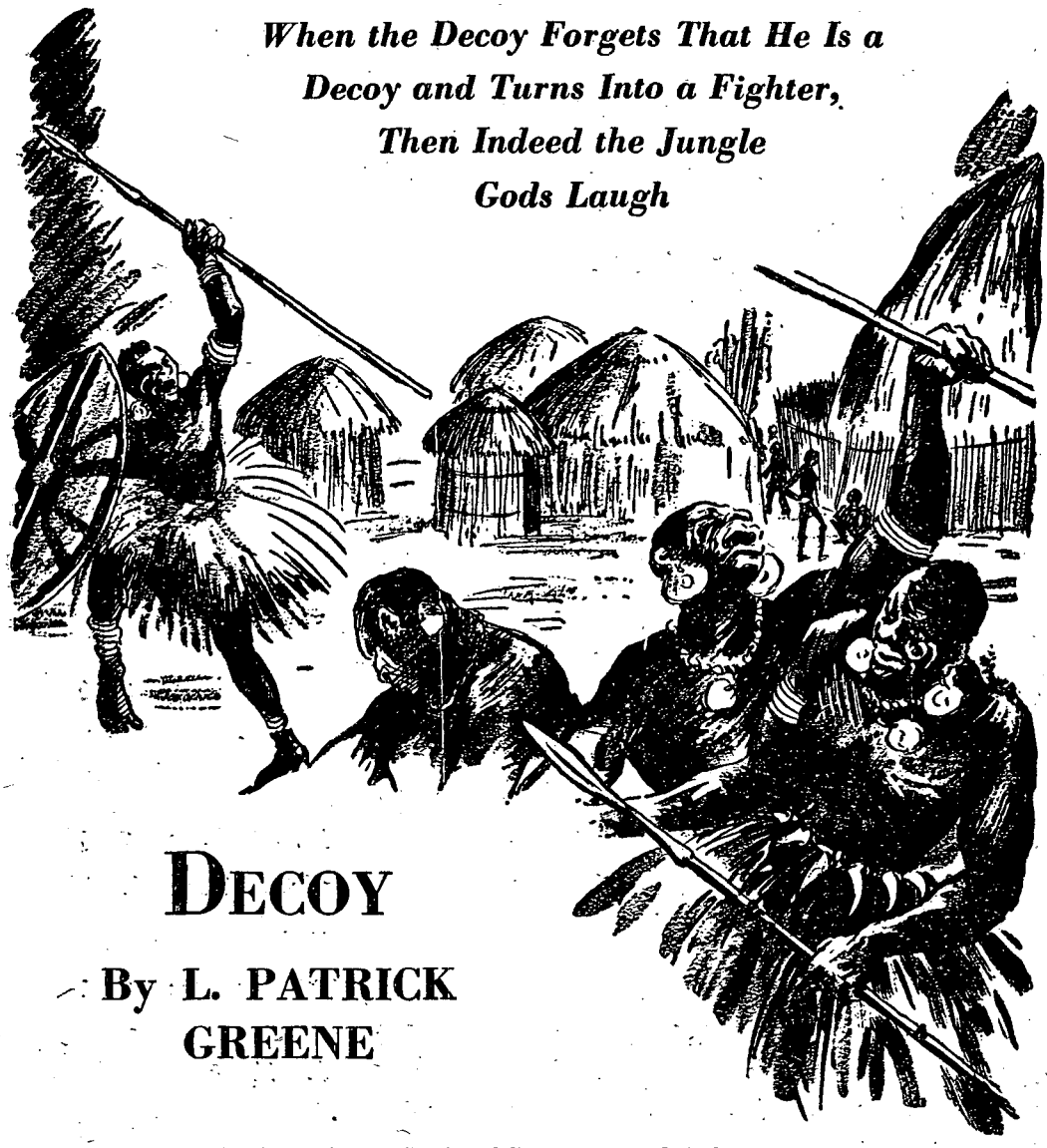
When the Decoy Forgets That He Is a Decoy and Turns Into a Fighter, Then Indeed the Jungle Gods Laugh



DECOY

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "By Rule of Drum," and Other Stories of the "Major" and Jim the Hottentot

I

THERE was hate in the eyes of the two men who glared at each other across the narrow, grease-stained table; a hate of such fierce intensity that a very little thing would have fanned it to killing fury. Both men sat tensely erect; the hand of each man rested close to his revolver.

A girl squatted on her haunches in the corner of the hut, watching the two white men with a detached, impersonal interest. She was comely, as the women of the Belgian Congo sometimes are. In years, according to the reckoning of a civilized world, she was very young—sixteen, at the outside. But African suns had ripened her; filled with the tribal lore of her people, her tutors the old women of the tribe, she was as old as the shadows—real and ghostly—which created an atmosphere of ever-abiding fear about the jungle village of her birth.

Occasionally she played childishly with the heavy rope of gawdy beads which encircled her throat; occasionally, with a gamin gesture of exaggerated modesty, she

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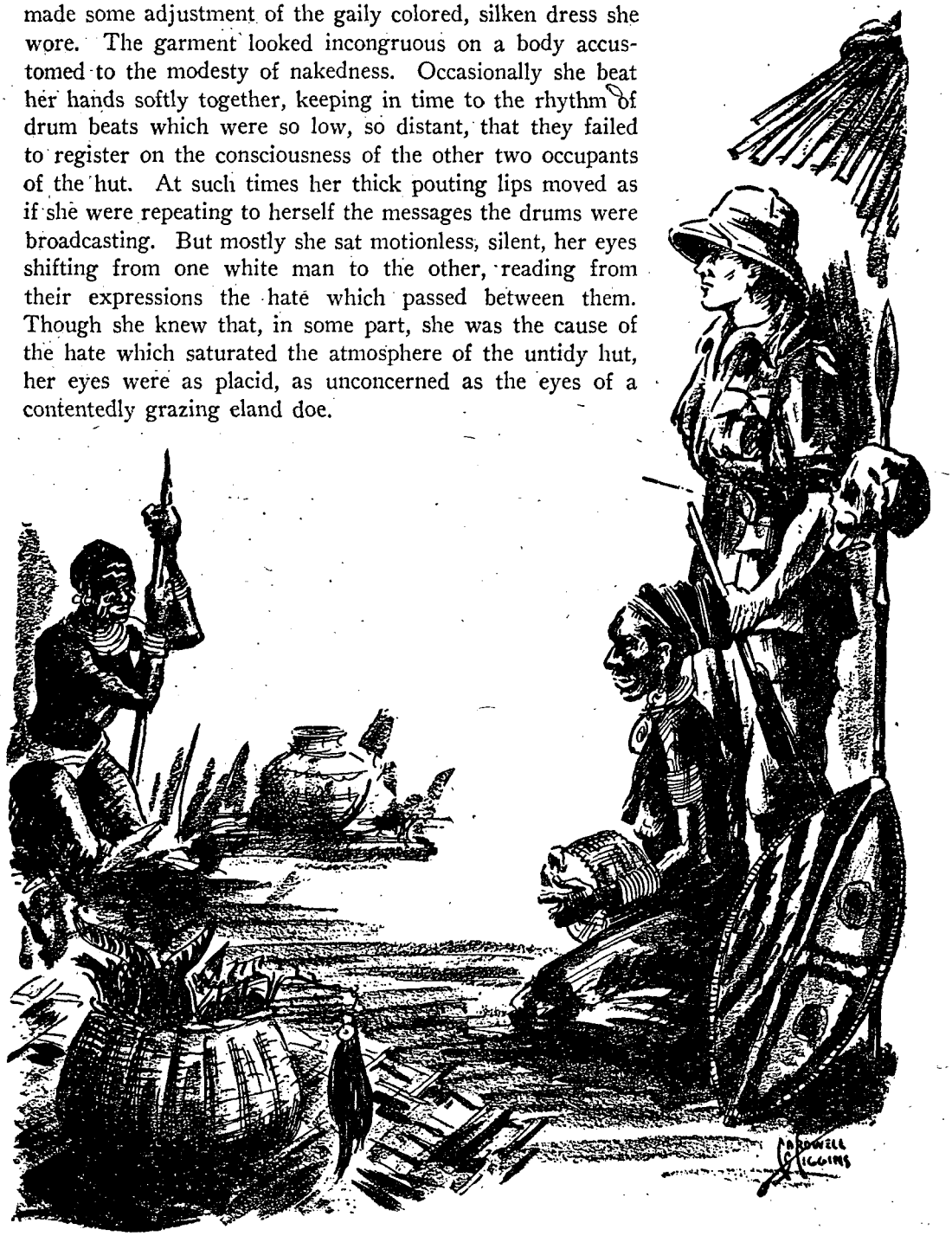
made some adjustment of the gaily colored, silken dress she wore. The garment looked incongruous on a body accustomed to the modesty of nakedness. Occasionally she beat her hands softly together, keeping in time to the rhythm of drum beats which were so low, so distant, that they failed to register on the consciousness of the other two occupants of the hut. At such times her thick pouting lips moved as if she were repeating to herself the messages the drums were broadcasting. But mostly she sat motionless, silent, her eyes shifting from one white man to the other, reading from their expressions the hate which passed between them. Though she knew that, in some part, she was the cause of the hate which saturated the atmosphere of the untidy hut, her eyes were as placid, as unconcerned as the eyes of a contentedly grazing eland doe.



THE older of the two men presently relaxed with a coarse oath and a laugh that was meant to be conciliatory. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head.

"This," he said slowly, "is folly. We are acting like children. It is the heat, Gautier, my friend. And, *mon dieu,* it *is* hot."

The other nodded and he also relaxed—

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physically, at least. His eyes continued to rest suspiciously on his companion; the hate which blazed in them was now tinged with contempt. He was in his early twenties and new to the country. Africa had driven the color from his clean shaven face, but it had not yet tanned his skin. His whiteness, in the gloom of the hut, looked unnatural, unhealthy. His white duck uniform was sweat stained; the jungle's unclean, trailing fingers had already smeared the copy book of his splendid physique. Fever had muddied the whites of his eyes, had bowed his shoulders and thinned his blood. He trembled with an ague he could not control as he said:

"Is *is* hot and I have a touch of fever. But I'm glad of it. Glad I have fever, I mean. It helps me to see things more clearly. It——"

"You are delirious, Gautier," the other interrupted suavely. "Fever, my poor friend, fogs the vision. It does not clear it. Fever creates mirages and phantoms. It makes white seem black and black, white."

"Fever can never whiten your blackness, Estrange," Gautier exclaimed heatedly.

Captain Estrange shrugged his shoulders.

"And so," he said lightly, "we have come to the beginning again. Well, describe my blackness. Talking may help you to defeat these delusions of fever. But be careful. Take heed to your words. I am disposed to be forbearing, but do not forget that I am in command of this post and your superior officer. Come now; you have stared at me long enough. Describe my —my blackness."

LIEUTENANT GAUTIER continued to stare at him in contemptuous silence and Estrange self-consciously fingered his bloated cheeks and sagging chin which bristled with a three days growth. His narrow eyes were bloodshot; his head was as obscenely bald as a vulture's. His skin was tanned by the sun and fever-yellowed. His uniform was sweat and grease stained. He was grossly fat. There remained to him little of the civilization which bred him. Africa had marked him, physically, mentally and morally.

"Well?" he questioned impatiently, his choler rising again under Gautier's steady gaze of contempt.

Gautier shrugged his shoulders.

"Of what use my cataloguing your vices. You know them as well as I do. What I know of you is contained in the report I have written and which is now on its way to headquarters by special runner."

Estrange laughed.

"You underrate me," he said. "No runner leaves this post without my permission and, in this case, that permission was not given. Naturally!"

"You swine!" Gautier gasped. "You mean you have read my report."

"No, no. You misjudge me. I am a man of honor. I burnt the report—unread. That is why I am curious to hear your opinion of me from your own lips."

"You a man of honor?" Gautier said coldly. "There is no honor in you. You are——"

ESTRANGE'S mocking laugh interrupted him.

"Careful, Gautier," he said. "Men die so easily in this country—and the verdict is always 'Death from natural causes.' But continue. You were saying?"

Gautier shook his head; it was the gesture of a beaten man.

"I have nothing further to say—at the moment."

Estrange was quick to reply to his lieutenant's afterthought.

"At the moment you live, Gautier. Tomorrow—" he shrugged his shoulders—"who knows? And so, for the moment, I will forget that I am your superior officer and you must speak. Yes. It is best that we settle this trouble that has risen between us. We should be comrades. Life can be tolerable, even here. Not, however, if we are to be at loggerheads. But if you will not see reason—well, it was pleasant for me before you came. It will doubtless be

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pleasant for me after you have——shall we say departed?"

Gautier was roused to an unreasoning rage by Estrange's mocking speech and smile.

"Yes, I will speak," he shouted. "It is men like you who bring us Belgians into bad repute. You are a vicious, cowardly bully. You pander to the basest side of the natives to whom you are supposed to bring the white man's justice. You have caused innocent men and women to be brutally flogged for no better reason than that they dared to protest against your injustices—or because it amused you to hear them scream. You send the native soldiers out on patrol with no white man to control them and laugh at the atrocities they commit."

"The soldiers are a little crude at times," Estrange commented suavely. "But they know their own people. They know that kindness is interpreted as fear—and these niggers kill the things that fear them. But continue."

Gautier glared at him.

"I have seen, Estrange," he said slowly, "the bodies of men, women and children murdered by the soldiers. They were tortured before death came to them."

"Doubtless they refused to impart much needed information, or refused to pay the tax that was due," Estrange said.

"You have an easily silenced conscience," Gautier said bitterly. "Children do not pay taxes, Estrange. Nor do they possess secrets——"

"It is a hunter's maxim, Gautier," Estrange interrupted easily, "to kill the cubs when you kill the lion. It is very sound."

Gautier ignored the interruption and continued doggedly:

"You use your position to further your own personal aims. You enrich yourself. You force the natives to trade with you. You are hand in glove with slavers and accept large bribes from them and in return give them permission to carry on the trade which we are sent here to destroy.

"Finally, your native women—"

"Mon dieu!" Estrange laughed coarsely. "I wondered how long it would be before you reached your real grievance. But, of course you're jealous. Well, I will be magnanimous. Here is Suzette; Take her. She is yours."

Gautier made a gesture of protest.

"You do not understand—or will not. Yet in a sense you're right. Your treatment of Suzette is one of the counts I have against you. Let her go back to her people, Estrange."

"Don't be a fool," Estrange replied curtly. "She is a hostage for the good behavior of her father."

"There would be no need to question her father's good behavior, or that of his people," Gautier retorted, "had you not led your soldiers against his village. You

sent some of his people into slavery. You brought the girl here for your own pleasure. You burnt his villages. But you did not destroy his courage. The fact that you keep his daughter does not restrain him. You dare not take a patrol into his district, Estrange."

ESTRANGE was silent for a little while. Then he said:

"It is not good that we should quarrel, so I am going to talk calmly to you. I am going to forget, for the moment, that I am your superior officer. I will forget—for ever, if you show yourself ready to see reason—your recent acts and words of insubordination. I will remember that you are very young and know very little of this country. Yes, I will explain things calmly to you."

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"My so called brutalities. What are they? *Pouf!*. You're too tenderhearted, Gautier. A nigger respects the man who beats him—and the more severe the beating, the greater the respect. I, who have lived so many years in this country, tell you that."

"And what measure of respect was paid to you by the poor devils who died under the lash, Estrange?"

"At least they tell me no more lies," Estrange retorted. "At least they have ceased to disobey me. No, I refuse to answer the charge of brutality except to assure you that the punishments you decry are necessary to preserve my life—and yours. We are isolated in this post, surrounded by thousands of savages who, only yesterday, were cannibals; who are today cannibals. Relax for one moment, do one thing that may be construed as fear—and that will be the end for you—perhaps for me too. I treat them in the only way they understand."

Gautier passed his hand wearily across his forehead and sighed.

"I don't know, Estrange—I cannot think calmly. And I am so new to the country. Perhaps you are right. Only it seems to me that we preserve our own lives at a frightful cost. Are they worth it? I wonder. But how can you explain your manner of living; your participation in those beastly degrading dances?"

"You are indeed blind, Gautier. Do you not know that I am counted an authority on native customs? How could I gain my knowledge save by being present, and appearing to participate, in the very feasts that you decry? Besides, it is at such times that I hear what is being planned in the district. I get advance information of any fresh deviltry that may be brewing. For that reason I keep a woman of the people in my hut. She is my ear. She hears things that are not audible to a white man. Now are you satisfied? Look here, I'll tell you what. You shall go on patrol tomorrow, to the district of Bushwidi. And you shall take Suzette with you. No, do not mistake me. You shall take her and return her to her own people—if you can find them."

"Do you mean that, Estrange?" Gautier demanded.

"Of course. I think you're foolish to concern yourself about the girl. She is happy here. She may not wish to leave." He pivoted suddenly in his chair and looked at the girl. Her eyes were riveted on Gautier. "Yes," he laughed, "she will go with you."

GAUTIER rose to his feet, looking very happy and youthful. "Thank you, Estrange," he said. "I am glad we have had this talk. There are still things I do not understand. But——" he shook his head doubtfully.

"You will learn in time," Estrange assured him with every appearance of good humor. "So. You will wish to make preparation now for the morrow's march. Good. Send Sergeant Talashio to me, will you? I will discuss with him which men had best accompany you. Oh, by the way"—he took a letter from his pocket—"you may run across an Englishman known as Aubrey St. John Major." He consulted the letter. "Six feet tall," he read, "gray eyes, dresses like a dude, wears a monocle, speaks with an affected drawl. Accompanied by a Hottentot named Jim. He's wanted by the English and Portuguese authorities. Arrest him—or, if you will, shoot him on sight. There's a large reward offered—not that that's likely to interest you—for him dead or alive."

"Very good, sir," Gautier said, saluted and left the hut.

Estrange sat for a moment in thoughtful silence. Suddenly he turned to the girl.

"Tomorrow," he said in the vernacular, "you will go with the young white man."

"Where?" she asked breathlessly.

"He goes to look for your people."

"No, they will kill him. They—"

"Not if you are there to protect him," Estrange interrupted. "Besides, fool, my soldiers will be with him. He leaves at sunrise tomorrow. Go and make ready."

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She bowed her head in submission; the pose hid the hate which blazed in her eyes.

As she departed a pock-marked, uniformed native entered and, after a casual salute, sat down in the chair Gautier had occupied.

"You sent for me," he said. "Is the young one still giving trouble? *Wu?* Why do you suffer him to live?"

"I am sending him to look for Bushwidi tomorrow," Estrange said meaningly. "He takes the girl back to her people."

The native grinned.

"Their spears will thank him," he said. Then he frowned. "But perhaps they will not let him find them."

"How many men should go with him?" Estrange asked.

"Sixty would not be too many," the native replied.

"Ten, only, go with him."

"That is good," the native leered, "as long as I am not one of the ten."

Estrange shook his head.

"No, you march with me—later. Now, let us select ten *good* men to go with him. Men that we can well spare. Men whose deaths will not be mourned."

"That is easy," the native laughed, "and now I see where this path leads. Bushwidi's people would remain hidden if a large force went with the lieutenant. But so small a force, *wu!* That will tempt them. They will take the bait and we others—we will spring the trap. Now for the men. First there is Swiva. He thinks he is a soldier because he once served with the English and remembers that, before you came to this post, he was a sergeant."

Estrange nodded.

"And Mumomeka shall go. The dog dared to take me to task this morning."

The native sergeant grinned.

"He is newly married—and young. But yes, he shall go. Then there is———"

II

THE jungle seemed to be asleep save for the two men who waited on a platform built on to the stout branch of a tree overlooking a small clearing. The jungle seemed to be asleep save for these two men and the goat which was tethered to a stake in the center of the clearing.

The heat was terrific. The rays of the noon-day sun beat on the backs of the two men like forced jets of scalding steam.

The goat moved about restlessly and its eyes continually searched the wall of the jungle which hemmed in the clearing. It was a powerfully built male; its horns looked capable of inflicting heavy damage and its red inflamed eyes glinted savagely.

"If he doesn't come soon, Jim," said one of the men on the platform, "I shall believe that he does not exist save in the minds of Bushwidi's people."

Jim, a Hottentot and as alien to this jungle country as the white man, the Major, grunted:

"Patience, Baas."

"Patience," the Major echoed almost irritably. "For three days we have sat here like dog apes, seeing nothing; hearing nothing but the bleating of the goat. I am beginning to think that Bushwidi told us about the Killer in order to keep us with him."

The Hottentot chuckled.

"The goat does not think that, Baas," he said with a jerk of his thumb toward the restless beast.

The Major yawned. "Goats are senseless, fear-ridden beasts," he said. "There is no Killer. Let us put an end to this and——"

As he spoke he rose and stretched himself. His head came in violent contact with a bough six feet above the platform. The blow knocked him off his balance and, reeling in an attempt to regain it, he came to the edge of the platform just as the Hottentot rose and moved quickly to his assistance. Their combined weight was too much for the structure. It tilted and they both slid with a thud to the ground, nine feet below.

The Hottentot was the first to recover.

"Baas," he cried anxiously, "are you hurt?"

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The Major's laugh reassured him.

"It is well to laugh, Baas. But would it be well if the Killer had come now? *Wo-we!* The rifles are up in the tree—and we are on the ground. I will talk to the fools who built that platform with a sjambok!"

"There is no fault, Jim," the Major gasped as he sat up and ruefully rubbed the top of his head. "There——"

"Look, Baas," Jim interrupted excitedly. "The Killer! Keep still—and ask the spirits to blind him to our presence."

The Major whistled softly and watched death crawl belly down in the ground out of the wall of the jungle. So marvellously did it harmonize with the background that even the Major—experienced hunter, though he was—found it difficult to say at what precise moment it had ceased to be one with the pattern of sunlight and shadow.

"Wo-we!" Jim exclaimed softly. "He is an elephant of leopards. He is bigger than a lion, Baas."

"It is a bally freak," the Major muttered in English. "It's impossible." And in the Hottentot's clicking dialect he added, "We'd better get up the tree, Jim."

"No, Bass, do not move."

There was more than a hint of fear in the Hottentot's voice and his eyes were fixed in an almost hypnotic stare at the leopard. The big cat, its head low, was moving slowly forward toward the two men; it seemed to flow as effortlessly over the ground as does a python.

THE Major and Jim were motionless. Leopards, they knew, are creatures of strange vagaries, the sport of sudden whims. There seems to be no code of laws governing their behavior. The situation which one day will impel a leopard into an exhibition of fearless, diabolical anger will, another day, put him to flight with his tail between his legs.

So now, although the Major and Jim knew that by shouting and waving of arms they might stampede the leopard, they also knew that those same maneuvers might cause it to charge them in a devastating fury. And, unarmed as they were, their rifles wedged securely in forks of the branch which had supported the platform, that was a risk they thought it unwise to take.

"Perhaps, Jim," the Major whispered, "he will prefer the goat."

"That is the message I am sending to him, Baas," the Hottentot replied. "I am telling him that my flesh is tough and stringy. But I don't think he hears me. *Weu!* He is an eater of men."

Despite the tenseness of the situation a laugh escaped the Major's lips. It had the shattering effect of a rifle report.

The leopard paused and, raising its head, glared balefully at the two men; it snarled and batted the air with one cruelly taloned paw. At the same moment the goat, which was huddled against the stake to which it was tethered, bleated plaintively. The leopard's head turned toward it for a moment then once again its head was lowered and it flowed over the ground toward the two men.

The Major drew his revolver but, although there was no finer shot in South Africa, he hesitated to use it. Revolvers are chancy weapons and the target offered by a head-on leopard is a difficult one to hit. The Major knew that a shot which failed to kill instantly would be disastrous; there would be no time for a second shot, for hell has no fury greater than that of a wounded leopard. So he decided to withhold his fire until the action was forced upon him. He still hoped that the great cat would take the bait which had been prepared for it and give Jim and himself an opportunity to retrieve their rifles.

The leopard was taking a course which brought it within five yards of the goat; but not once did it swerve from its course or shift its eyes from the other end of the clearing, thirty feet away. Obviously its palate craved for other meat than goat flesh.

And then the goat, uttering a noise that

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was more like a bark of defiance than a bleat, charged with incredible speed. It caught the spotted killer square in the ribs and bowled it over. Before the leopard, snarling and spitting savagely, could recover, the goat butted it again and again.

The Major and Jim were quick to seize the opportunity afforded them by the goat's courageous attack. Jim swarmed up the tree with the agility of a monkey and was quickly followed by the Major. By the time the leopard had recovered its feet and remembered it was a killer and could kill the goat with one raking blow of its powerful paws, the two men had retrieved their rifles. As the leopard, screaming with rage, turned on the goat, the Major fired two shots in quick succession.

The leopard dropped lifelessly but the goat still butted it, nor did it desist until the two men dropped down from the tree and, rifles at the ready in case another shot was necessary, ran toward it. And then, now the danger was past, the goat remembered its fear and ran bleating from the dead leopard. It did not stop until checked by the tethering rope.

THE Major and Jim examined the dead beast with something approaching awed amazement. It truly had seemed a gigantic beast but the Major had made allowances for the predicament he was in. At such times a man is apt to over-estimate;

the biggest fish is always the one that gets away. But now that he was able to examine the carcass he knew he was looking at a freak of nature; the leopard's size could not be explained in any other way.

"It's as big as a Bengal tiger," he muttered. "No wonder he's terrified all the natives of the district."

He looked at Jim who was staring incredulously at the animal, his hand over his mouth, shaking his head from side to side.

"It's real, Jim," the Major said lightly. "And it's dead."

"Wo-we!" Jim exclaimed. "And we would now be dead had not the goat forgotten that it was a goat. From now on I shall be afraid to bait a hook for fear lest the decoy I use should turn into a crocodile. But," he added contemptuously, "it is again a goat."

"I wonder if there are any more like this, Jim?"

"No, Baas," Jim said positively, "there could not be. And have not the people of Bushwidi said there was but this one? And truly, this one is big enough to prove all the tales we thought were lies. Your name will be great with the people because of this killing. *Au-a!* Your name is always great—with all people. You are the Mah-jor."

"And you," the Major interposed quickly, cutting short Jim's song of praise, "you are Jim the Hottentot, my servant! But praise in this, Jim, is the goat's meed."

"He shall have it, Baas. *Wo-we!* If need be, I will be his slave." He looked wonderingly about the clearing. "It is strange that Bushwidi's people have not yet shown themselves."

"They will be here presently, Jim," the Major said absently; he was still lost in admiration of the leopard. "Get the goat and we three will greet them."

Jim hurried to obey, talking softly to the goat as he approached it, praising its courage. As he bent down to pick up the tethering rope the goat charged once again. Down Jim went, his praises changing on the instant to yells of surprise, pain and anger.

The Major pivoted quickly, thinking that another leopard had appeared on the scene, exploding in a loud fit of laughter when he saw the cause of Jim's downfall. His

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laughter was short-lived however for the goat made a sudden rush for him and he was forced to retreat to the edge of the clearing. There Jim quickly joined him and the two men gave themselves up to laughter. After a few abortive attempts to reach them the goat stood as though on guard over the leopard's body.

SUDDENLY a swarm of natives appeared at the edge of the clearing. They halted there, an expression of ludicrous amazement on their faces as they looked at the goat and the still form of the leopard. Presently, emboldened by the laughter of Jim and the Major, they swarmed on to the clearing, praising the white man and shouting insults at the big spotted beast which had taken such heavy toll of them.

A portly graybeard, the chief of the tribe, led them and at him the goat launched his third charge. Over the portly one went and the others fled back to the shelter of the jungle. Some shouted that the leopard had come back to life; others, that the dead beast's evil spirit had entered the body of the goat. The chief, however, was made of sterner stuff and, scrambling to his feet, waited the goat's next charge with upraised spear.

"Do not kill him, Bushwidi," the Major shouted as he and Jim ran forward. "He is a warrior."

At the same time a sturdy little eight year old ran out of the jungle and knelt down beside the goat, petting it. This was sufficient to destroy the people's superstitious terror and the chief's anger—and they all swarmed back on to the clearing, dispelling the jungle's shadows with shouts of praise and laughter.

III

THAT night the people of Bushwidi wildly celebrated the death of the ghost beast. The Major and Jim were honored guests and sat with Bushwidi watching the festivities. The night hours passed rapidly and at last the Major decided that it was time for him to retire to his camp, about a quarter of a mile from the village, for there are some things that it is not wise for a white man to witness —if he wishes to remain a white man.

"Where do you go?" Bushwidi asked as the Major rose to his feet.

"To my own place," the Major replied.

"But no, white man, you shame me," the chief expostulated. "All I have is yours. *Wu!* You shame me. You are a man. Perhaps you are lonely. The night is young yet, but still—" and he offered the customary hospitality to an honored guest.

The Major frowned thoughtfully at the women who, in response to Bushwidi's orders, grouped themselves excitedly before him. They, and Bushwidi, thought the Major was hesitating over his choice. Actually he was considering how best to refuse the hospitality offered without giving grave offense. A primitive people are deadly serious about their customs of hospitality.

And then, quite suddenly, the Major was conscious that the chief and those with him were no longer interested in his choice; something else was demanding their attention.

"Phew!" he muttered. "That was a nasty moment."

"Best go now, Baas," Jim advised, "before they remember the gift they offer you."

"No, I wait to learn what the trouble is, Jim."

"Trouble enough, Baas," Jim replied uneasily.

The dance drums had ceased their maddening beat and all the people of the kraal were standing motionless, listening.

THE Major and Jim listened too and presently heard a distant signal drum sending out a message; the note of the drum was high and registered so faintly on their ear-drums that it was hard to distinguish it from the throb of blood at their temples. That the jungle natives had heard it, despite the roll of their dance drums, can only be explained by the fact that their

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nervous systems are tuned to receive the vibrations of the signal drums and that they are always, no matter what their occupation, subconsciously listening for signals.

The distant drumming now ceased and the village drummer beat out a staccato inquiry. It was answered at length. Another query, a terse reply—and then, after a few moments' silence utter pandemonium broke out. The women ran to their huts; the men clustered about Bushwidi urging him to lead them against some hated foe whose advent the signal drums had announced.

"Sleep now," Bushwidi ordered. "Tomorrow we will deal with them."

"What is it, Bushwidi," the Major asked quietly as the warriors, shouting exultantly, departed to their huts.

Bushwidi looked at him coldly.

"How great is your friendship for us, white man?" he countered. "If there is a thorn in my foot, will you help me to destroy it?"

"At least I will help you pull it out," the Major replied lightly.

"It must be destroyed," the chief insisted fiercely.

"As to that I make no promise, Bushwidi. I must know more. Is it white men against whom you lead your warriors on the morrow?"

He was surprised at the fierceness of the native's reply.

"Yes, white men. Billygees! So what now? Will you fight on our side against them?"

"Is it wise," the Major interrupted, "to make war talk with them? Your spears and arrows will be useless against their guns. And the white men will have many black soldiers with them. *Au!* This trail you follow may lead to the death of all your people. You hope to pluck a thorn from your foot. I tell you, you will drive a spear into your heart."

BUSHWIDI laughed exultantly.

"There is only one Billygee and with him but ten black dogs! We will creep upon them before they know that death walks through the jungle. And then—*Wu!*. We will wipe out the memory of the shame and evil they have put upon us."

"What was the shame and evil?" the Major asked.

"Many moons ago, a year and a year, they came to us, white man. One Billygee and many black dogs who did his bidding. The Billygee was a man whose evil clad him with fatness. He gave me soft words to stop my ears and strong water to destroy my strength. And because he was a white man, a Billygee and my overlord, I paid him the proper homage. *Wu!* Never has this country seen such feasting as I gave in his honor. All people who called me chief came to pay my guest homage. Aye, and we did honor, too, to the black dogs who were his servants. Their numbers? I tell you that those you have seen here tonight were as the count of my fingers to the hairs of my head, compared with those who came to my place—no, not here, this is a poor place; then I was a powerful chief—to do honor to my guests. And they came unarmed. It was an order, the Billygee said. He said it was an insult to come before him armed. He said he was my friend, not my enemy. And I trusted him. Was he not a white man and my overlord? *Wu!* But how tell you the rest of it? When the feasting was far along and my warriors thinking of a woman's softness rather than the bite of death, death came to them. Truly. The Billygee gave orders to his black soldiers and they shot my people down, laughing as they killed. Some of us—the few you have seen—escaped in the darkness. The flames from our burning huts deepened our darkness. When, in time, the Billygee and his dogs departed, taking with them the young maidens and men to sell to those who buy, *Wu!* The place which had been was nothing but heaps of hot ash."

"It is an evil tale," the Major said softly. "But why did they do this? Even evil finds a reason for its evilness."

"They said I had not paid the tax."

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"And had you?"

The chief shook his head.

"It was a new tax—I had not heard of it. They also said that I had murdered two of the Billygees' black soldiers."

"And had you?"

"I had caused two men to be put to death. I did not know they were soldiers of the Billygees. But even had I known—" he added stoutly—"I should have still sent death to them. They had committed great evils in my country." Bushwidi specified just what those evils had been and the Major shuddered slightly.

"Was there any further charge against you?" he asked.

"They said," Bushwidi replied somewhat sullenly, he was beginning to resent the Major's cross-examination of him, "that I was planning to rebel against the Billygees. But that was a lie. And since that day the fat, evil man has sent his soldiers against me on many occasions—but they have not found us. The jungle is wide and my people know its secret places where we have hidden until the soldiers have returned to their own place. And what evil I can do against them—that I do. That is why they sent their soldiers after us. They desire to put an end to the evil they began so many moons ago. That is all, white man. If you are our friend, you will fight on our side—at least you will not fight against us. If you are not our friend—" he shrugged his shoulders— "at least you will not be permitted to fight against us."

Before the Major could question him further, Bushwidi turned abruptly and entered his hut.

THE Major hesitated a moment or two, then he and Jim made their way to the camp. They found their carriers wide awake. They had not been permitted to attend the festivities which celebrated the killing of the leopard because they were men of a neighboring tribe and their presence might have provoked trouble. But they had heard the signal drums and were excitedly discussing the part their white man would play.

The Major ordered them to be silent and sitting down in his canvas chair which had been set for him just inside his bell tent, thoughtfully considered his course of action.

"There is nothing you can do, Baas."

The Major started. It seemed that Jim, who was squatting on his haunches just outside the tent, must have read his thoughts.

"Nothing, Jim?" he questioned.

"Nothing, Baas," the Hottentot repeated with a chuckle of satisfaction. "This is one time when you cannot risk your life in order to save men from the death they doubtless deserve."

"But I must do something, Jim. I can't let Bushwidi's people murder the Billygee and his soldiers."

"And would you fight on their behalf, Baas?" Jim asked scornfully. "*Wo-we!* To do that is to take their evil upon your

shoulders. Would you stop a man from killing the leopard that raids his herds?"

The Major ignored Jim's question.

"At least I must warn them," he expostulated.

Jim laughed.

"How, Baas? You do not know where the Billygees are. You do not know when they come to this place."

"That I will find out tomorrow, Jim."

"Tomorrow the warriors take the trail, Baas. Tomorrow will be too late."

"Then I go with the warriors, Jim," the Major decided. "Have skoff ready before the sun rises, Jim. Sleep well."

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He undressed and put on a suit of gaudy pyjamas which seemed to convert him into an effete dude and a few minutes later was sleeping soundly.

The Hottentot sat for a long time staring into the flickering flames of the camp fire, deeply concerned about his Baas's intention to march with the warriors on the morrow.

"Wo-we," he muttered uneasily. "It is like him. Tomorrow he will set himself in the path of two fighting leopards and try to soothe the ills which madden them. And he will die! And I must die too—though that is nothing."

He rose suddenly and roused one of the sleeping carriers, a giant of a man whose loyalty to the Major was almost as fervent as Jim's own.

The two whispered for a while together and then the carrier left the camp and made his way to the village.

IV

NEXT morning when the Major awoke Jim had his bath and shaving water all prepared for him. And by the time he was dressed an appetizing meal was ready for him. He ate with the appetite of a well-trained athlete and was finished before the east lightened with the breaking of day.

"Come, Jim," he said as he buckled his cartridge belt about his waist, "we must go or they will start without us."

"I am ready, Baas," the Hottentot replied readily. "But do we go alone, or do the carriers come with us?"

"We go alone, Jim. The carriers stay here. This is not their *indaba.*"

He looked doubtfully at the Hottentot. He had expected Jim to renew the protestations he had made last night and was somewhat nonplussed at the Hottentot's ready acquiescence. However, he nodded thoughtfully and led the way up to the village, Jim walking closely behind him.

Save for several blear-eyed old women who were huddled about the embers of their cook fires, the place seemed to be deserted.

"We are too early for them, Jim," the Major said. "The warriors still sleep. Perhaps now that the heat of beer has passed from them they are not so eager to fight the Billygees."

"Doubtless that is it, Baas," Jim agreed easily.

The rising sun broke through the clouds in the east: the heat which poured from it was a potent foretaste of what was yet to be endured before another jungle day had slipped away into the cave of yesterdays.

More women came from their huts, yawning lazily, and joined their elders about the cook fires. Sleep was still heavy upon them and they spoke in hushed whispers until, presently, the children made their appearance—shouting, laughing, with no thought beyond the satisfying of their immediate hunger.

The Major frowned thoughtfully. He could not understand the non-appearance of the men. He looked suspiciously at Jim but the Hottentot's expression told him nothing.

At last the Major rose and walked over to the group of women and children who sat before the chief's hut. They looked up at him apathetically and answered his greeting in dull, lethargic voices. He was conscious, though, that they eyed him somewhat furtively.

"The men sleep late," he said casually. "The beer they drank last night hangs heavily on their eyes, perhaps. The dancing weights their limbs."

"Truly. That is it, white man," they replied in a glib chorus. It was too glib and addressing the chief's son—that same boy whose goat had been yesterday's decoy—he said sharply:

"Where is your father?"

"Wu!" the boy replied importantly. "My father leads the warriors— "He broke off suddenly and concluded lamely, "My father sleeps."

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ONCE again the Major addressed the women:

"Why do you lie to me? I am your friend. Now speak true word. The men folk are not here?"

"That is true."

"They have gone into the jungle," he persisted, "searching for the Billygees?"

"That is true."

"When did they go?"

"We cannot say. Night's darkness still covered the sun. We slept." The questions and answers sounded like a witch-doctor's "smelling out" ceremony.

"Which way did they go?"

"We do not know."

"You know—but will not tell me?"

"We do not know."

And this answer they repeated over and over again, no matter how craftily the Major phrased his question. He turned away at last, realizing the futility of trying to extract information from the women; nor would he again endeavor to trap one of the children into giving him information.

"Jim," he said reproachfully, "this is your doing."

"My doing, Baas," Jim countered innocently. "What mean you?"

"You knew, Jim," the Major said accusingly, "that the men left in the night time. I think, perhaps, you advised Bushwidi to go secretly so that I could not join them."

"*Wo-we,* Baas," Jim exclaimed. "How can you say that? I left this place when you did last night; nor did I return, nor did Bushwidi or any of his people come to me." Perhaps if Jim had left things at that he might have persuaded the Major that he had had no part in the night-time departure of Bushwidi's warriors. But Jim could not keep a note of exultant relief from his voice as he continued. "So that is the end of it, Baas. Our hands and feet are tied. Before nighttime Bushwidi's men will have sent the Billygees to that dark place in the land of spirits which doubtless is reserved for them. There is nothing you can do, Baas. Nothing."

"We are not blind, Jim," the Major said. "The jungle is an open page across which the feet of the warriors have left their mark. Come."

"Where, Baas?"

"To look for the trail of the warriors, and follow it."

He left the village at a sharp pace and Jim—after a moment's hesitation—followed him.

"Baas," he said, "if you are determined on this, it would be best if we went back to the camp and got the carriers to help us."

The Major shook his head.

"No, Jim, this is not their *indaba.* They would have to answer to Bushwidi if they helped us now. What we do—we do alone. Or, if you have no stomach for it, I will do it alone."

"Baas!" Jim exclaimed indignantly. "But tell me this—what will you do if we find Bushwidi? What can you do?"

"Perhaps nothing, Jim. But I cannot remain idle and let a white man be murdered."

"Even though that white man be evil, Baas? *Wo-we.* It is in such things that white men have little wisdom. Why hesitate to destroy evil? *Au-a!.* There are some men who only cease their evil-doing when sleep overtakes them. Why do white men hate to kill? Death is only a long sleep."

AFTER Jim's protest both men were silent and they concentrated on the ground before them, making a wide circle about the village, looking for the footprints of Bushwidi's warriors. The ground of the clearing which surrounded the village was iron hard and they quickly gave up their search there and entered the jungle. But though the men were unusually clever hunters and able to follow game spoor over the bush veldt of the south lands, they found things infinitely more difficult here. It was like translating a language with which they were but vaguely familiar. The characters were the same and occasionally whole words were

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readily recognizable; but the piecing of things together was a slow process calling for frequent halts and consultations. To complicate matters, they were endeavoring to pick up the trail of men who knew the jungle as well as the wild beasts which there had their being; and also these men had taken pains to hide their trail.

And yet, this was after they had been searching for nearly an hour, Jim found a clue which opened up before him the way taken by Bushwidi. Proud of his hunting craft, he shouted exultantly:

"I have found it, Baas."

But before the Major could join him he hastily erased the foot marks which had attracted his attention and broke a green twig several yards to the right of it.

"Where, Jim?" the Major demanded, pushing his way through a tangle of creepers.

Jim pointed triumphantly to the broken twig. The Major examined it carefully and then laughed.

"Old age is coming to you, Jim," he bantered. "The sap still runs. You must yourself have broken the twig in passing."

"*Wo-we,* Baas," Jim confessed lugubriously. "I am indeed a fool. Well, we can still search."

They moved off again, the Hottentot carefully shepherding the Major away from the trail he had discovered. And so for another hour they searched the jungle, then the Major made a discovery on one of the faintly defined paths which laced the undergrowth which convinced him that along that path the warriors of Bushwidi had passed. He followed the path for a little while and as the signs increased he refused to be put off by the Hottentot's half-hearted denials that the trail was the right one. Indeed, Jim acted so suspiciously that his denials only served to strengthen the Major's conviction. He thought that Jim was trying to put him off from following the trail and so prevent him from interfering with the vengeance of Bushwidi. He would have thought differently had he seen the contented gleam in Jim's eyes as he followed his Baas; that gleam gave the lie to Jim's mutterings of discontent.

At noon sounds came to them of a large body of men encamped somewhere in the jungle to the right of the trail.

"We have found them, Jim," the Major exclaimed.

The Hottentot shook his head and pulled the Major down behind the cover of a screen of trailing creepers.

"No, Baas," he said flatly, "I do not know who they are—but I know they are not Bushwidi's warriors."

"Who else?" the Major retorted.

"I don't know, Baas. *Au-a!* I have been a fool. Listen, Baas; I found the trail of Bushwidi close to the village—that time I showed you the broken twig—but I hid it from you, thinking to save you from a great folly. As for this trail we have been following, *wo-we!* it was not made by a war party, Baas. Look closely and you will see the footprints of women and children mingling with those of the men. Further, it is a trail made two or three days ago. But to what have I brought you, Baas? Thinking to keep you from evil, I have perhaps led you into another and greater one."

The Major frowned.

"You have taken too much upon yourself, Hottentot," he said coldly.

"Baas!" Jim exclaimed.

"I am a man," the Major continued, "not a child to be led by the hand. I make my own roads. And you have made a mock of me. You have put thorns across the way I wished to take. Almost I am ready to say you are no longer my servant. Almost——"

"Baas, Baas," Jim entreated. "I am of no account. But I am your dog, Baas."

"Then you ask pardon for what you have done? You confess a fault?"

"No, Baas," Jim answered stoutly. "I confess no fault. What I did, I would do again. You have spent many years taking upon your back the blows meant for others.

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Some few, too, have fallen upon my back. There is so much evil in the world that it is folly to go seeking it. This time, at least, I was resolved you would not find it. I led you astray, and have no regrets, Baas."

THE frown vanished from the Major's face, his steelgray eyes softened and there was now in them something of the sky's blueness.

"What a wonderful thing is a Hottentot," he said softly. And aloud, "Remembering what I remember, Jim, I cannot remain angry. My life has been in your hands too many times for me to remember today's folly."

"*Au-a*, Baas," Jim exclaimed in relieved tones.

"But," the Major continued, "to what have you led me?"

"From a lesser to a greater evil, I think, Baas," Jim said miserably. "But stay here,

hidden, Baas, while I go and see what manner of men are hidden back there."

"We go together, Jim."

They made their way with the utmost caution through the thick jungle growth. They did not take a forward step until they had parted the grasses and tangle of creepers which blocked their view of the next step they must take. Their footfalls were noiseless; not a twig snapped under an unwary foot; scarcely a bruised leaf marked their passing. Slow as their pace was, they presently went even slower, inch by cautious inch, for they were now very close to the hidden camp and knew from fragments of conversation that the men were the black soldiers of the Belgian Congo.

At last they reached the very edge of a jungle clearing and saw there, sprawled indolently on the ground, at least a hundred uniformed natives. And seated on a camp stool directly opposite the Major, two or three natives standing before him, was a grossly fat white man.

White officer and black men all had a debased, brutal appearance. Their laughter was not normal; it suggested mirth at obscenely blasphemous amusements; it was the laughter of men who, confident of their numbers and superior arms could be as cruel as a pack of dog apes are to a helpless victim of their insane anger.

THEY were boasting—white officer and black men—of the easy victory they would gain over Bushwidi's defenseless village, and of the surprise which was in store for Bushwidi's warriors when they returned from their expedition. The Major was a little puzzled by their references to the "young officer and the ten men who were with him." He could not quite understand what part they were to play. Apparently, it was expected they would all be killed—and this fat white man and his soldiers seemed to be greatly amused at the thought. Talk was made, too, of tortures unspeakable which would be inflicted on the old women and children too young to withstand the rigors of a forced march; of barbarous punishments to be inflicted on such men of Bushwidi's they succeeded in taking alive.

The Major's face whitened. As a man in a dream he unslung his rifle and aimed at the fat white man whose brutal, mocking laughter encouraged his men to boasting of yet greater evils they had practised before on a helpless people, and would practice again today.

"No, Baas!" Jim whispered hoarsely. "That is no way out for us—or for Bushwidi's people."

"You are right, Jim," the Major sighed.

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"Come. We have heard enough. Let us go."

They silently left the place and headed back through the jungle for the trail. What noise they made in their haste was masked by the laughter of the soldiers. They had almost reached the trail when two soldiers stepped out from behind a thick bush and, with widespread arms, blocked their progress. The soldiers were big, heavily muscled men. They leered triumphantly at the Major and Jim.

"You will come with us," one said. "The Fat One will doubtless desire to talk with you."

The Major struck with the swiftness of a striking snake: his powerful fist crashed full on the point of the speaker's jaw—a perfectly timed blow with all the Major's weight behind it—and he dropped without a sound. Nor was Jim backward. The other soldier's mouth opened to shout an alarm. But that alarm was never given. Head down, Jim charged at him and butting him in the pit of the stomach knocked the wind out of him. At the same time Jim knocked the man's legs from under him with a shrewd kick delivered with the side of his foot. The man went down, Jim on top of him. Before Jim rose again, his hunting-knife flashed twice—once sparklingly bright; the second time dulled with steaming blood.

"*Wu!*" Jim exclaimed as he casually wiped his knife on the dead soldier's tunic. "That is one who will take no part in the torturing of women and children."

The Major nodded. For once he did not chide Jim's blood lust. But there was more than his life dependent on the silencing of these two soldiers. He could not be overly squeamish under such conditions.

"We'd better drag them under the bush here, Baas," Jim said. "Maybe they will not be missed."

The Major nodded and helped Jim drag the two men—the one Jim had killed and the one he had knocked out—under cover.

"Come, Jim," he then said impatiently. "There is much to do."

"Coming, Baas," Jim said. "First I wipe out all signs that we have passed by this way. You go on. Presently I will catch up with you."

AND as the Major resumed the trail back to the village Jim stooped down and with a cunning, practised hand removed all traces of the short struggle which had been waged there. He stood for a moment inspecting his handiwork, then turned toward the bush where the two men were hidden.

"My Baas hits hard," he muttered. "Sleep follows the blows he deals. But men awake from sleep. And so——"

He unsheathed his hunting knife and crept under the bush.

He nodded grimly as he emerged and hurried after the Major.

"Death came easily to that one," he muttered, "but I would rather be awake when it comes to me—awake and fighting."

He broke into a fast run as soon as he came to the trail and presently caught up with the Major. For a little while the two men ran in silence.

"What now, Baas?" Jim demanded at length.

"Is it not plain, Jim. Some good came of the trick you played on me this morning. Consider, too, what good luck there is in this. We might have gone a hundred ways through the jungle and found nothing. We might have followed a hundred trails, but only the one we did follow would have led us to that evil white man. The wonder of it——"

"It is no wonder to me, Baas," Jim grumblingly interrupted, "that your feet lead you toward trouble. The wonder is that, now you have found it, you run from it. Or do you? Why do we run? Where do we go? What do we do?"

"Do you ask, Jim? Last night the signal drums told Bushwidi that a Billygee with ten soldiers was marching toward his village. And Bushwidi, having no fear of so small a force, has led his warriors out against them. Whether he will find them

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or not I am not sure in my mind. But of this I am sure, those eleven men are only a decoy to lure Bushwidi away leaving his village, his women and children unprotected. But when Bushwidi returns what, think you, will he find?"

"Wo-we!" Jim exclaimed. "The Billygees are clever. Death will roost heavily in the village of Bushwidi. Unless—" he added excitedly— "you have a plan, Baas?"

"I search my mind for one, Jim. It would be easy if there were no old women, no young children, we could give the alarm and they would scatter and hide in the jungle."

"There would not be time for that, I think, Baas. Listen."

They halted for a moment listening to the sounds which told them that the soldiers were making ready to march. They heard two names shouted again and again and guessed that search was being made for the two men the Major and Jim had met.

"And it would be simple," the Major continued as they resumed their journey, "if the soldiers were not armed with guns. With the aid of our carriers, we could keep them at bay until Bushwidi returned. But they *are* armed. It would seem to be the end, Jim."

"So it would seem, Baas," the Hottentot assented gravely. It did not occur to him to suggest that they could save their own lives quite easily, or to remind the Major that the affairs of Bushwidi's people were no concern of theirs. Jim grumbled a lot and loudly supported the doctrine of self-preservation—but that was only a pose.

"We must fight, Baas," he said definitely. "After all, we are two who are more than two. That has been proved. The carriers number forty, they have spears and bows. They are clever jungle hunters —also they hate the Billygees. So, this is now their *indaba*.. And the Baas has forgotten the women."

"The women, Jim?"

"But of course, Baas. Women become warriors when the lives of their young are imperilled. Did you not know that? *Wo-we!*. What is more dangerous than a lioness fighting for her cubs?"

AFTER that the two men ran in silence, their easy, effortless gait eating up the distance. As they neared the village the Major sent Jim down to his camp and went on to the village alone.

The women looked at him curiously as he entered.

"News!" he cried. "Listen to me. There is no time to waste. Death walks in the jungle."

"Death always walks in the jungle," said an old crone.

"The Billygees come," the Major said.

There was laughter at that.

"Our warriors have gone to take death to them," the chief's head wife retorted.

"I tell you that death comes here," the Major insisted. "Bushwidi and your menfolk have been lured away by a cunning trick. They have gone looking for a Billygee who has but ten soldiers with him. But there now comes a Billygee marching to this place with ten times ten soldiers."

The women laughed at him and resumed their tasks, making ready for the feast which would crown Bushwidi's victory over his enemies. As the Major turned away, despairing of moving the women to a realization of the approaching peril, the small son of Bushwidi came up to him.

"Do you speak a true word, white man?" he demanded.

"Yes, o small son of a great chief," the Major replied with a sigh.

"How soon before they come here, white man?" the boy asked.

"Soon," the Major said. "Soon, I think. But maybe not before the sun's setting. Men sure of victory have no need of haste."

The boy's lips trembled a little. Then he said bravely:

"What can we do, white man?"

"How far is the place where the women and children have hidden on those other

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occasions the Billygees came searching for you."

"Too far, white man. Nor could we go there now. There are some women here who are too ill to walk. Besides, the Billygees would soon be on our trail and death would come harder to us because we had given them trouble."

"Then we must fight," the Major decided. "Tell the women to listen to me."

The boy appealed to the women.

"Listen to me, you women," he shouted in a high shrill voice. "I am the voice of Bushwidi, my father. The white man wishes to speak to you. Listen to him—and obey."

THEY gathered quickly about the Major at that, laughing merrily at the boy's assumption of his father's power. But as the Major spoke to them, the laughter faded from their eyes. Their faces set sternly; mothers hugged their babies closer to them; protecting arms encircled the waists of the young unmarried girls. For a moment they surrendered to a panic of fear and filled the jungle with the sound of their lamentations. But this phase quickly passed; courage, born of desperation, came to them.

"Tell us what we can do, white man," they pleaded. "You will find us quick to obey."

And so he appointed to them the task of strengthening the stout pole stockade which encircled the village; and to digging shallow ditches—and to other labors which would make the village harder to capture by the Belgians. The children helped them; even youngsters of four and five years found tasks suited to their strength.

Presently Jim marched into the village at the head of but ten carriers—heavily loaded.

"The rest, Baas," Jim reported in tones of great disgust, "have fled into the jungle. They said that this was no affair of theirs. *Wo-we!* Nor would they wait until I could fetch you to talk to them; they were afraid you would persuade them against their fears."

The big carrier, his name was Kabo, came to the Major.

"Wu!" he said. "I am ashamed, white man. Those men were of my village and of my clan. They have heaped dirt upon my name and upon the name of us all. They——"

"It is no matter," the Major interrupted. "The courage of those of you who remain will wipe out the shame. Now

hurry, for there is much to be done. Get the rest of the packs to this place, then help the women."

As Kabo led the carriers to the tasks appointed to them ten of the oldest women of the village came to the Major.

"We are going into the jungle, white man," their spoke-woman said.

The Major looked at them thoughtfully.

"And do you think that there, old ones, you will find safety?"

They laughed.

"What good is safety to us—if the rest die," she replied. "No. We will climb into the branches of the trees and when the Billygees come, we will fall upon them."

"So you would go to meet death," the Major said. "Have patience, old ones. It will come quick enough."

"Still," the woman said stubbornly, "we go. If we kill only one Billygee before death overtakes us, that will be one less for you to kill; that will be one thorn removed from the flesh of our people. Think not of us, white man. We are old; the Billygees have long since taken our men from us. *Ai-e!* And now our children and our children's children are in danger. Life

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holds nothing for us save death. And death we welcome if, so be, these others live. Let us go, white man. It is our *indaba.*"

The Major looked round the village and saw the young women—some carried their babies on their backs or astride their hips—working stoically to strengthen the defenses of the village; he watched young children toiling bravely beside their mothers. They were the future of the race—these old ones had lived their span. Yet he could not send them out to certain death; such an act was against the dictates of the civilization which bred him. He was reared on the creed that the strong must protect the weak, the strong die that the weak may live.

"What can you do?" he said scornfully. You have scarce strength enough to walk unaided?"

"It takes little strength, white man, to drive a sharp spear into a man's heart."

"Your tread in the jungle will be as heavy as an elephant's," he insisted. "The Billygees will find you and, to save yourselves from torture, you will tell them of what we do to make ready to receive them."

"Our tread is lighter than a warrior's, white man. Digging has strengthened our arms. *Wu!* If you are afraid we will talk—cut out our tongues.

"And now, we have talked too much. With your permission—or without it—we go to play our appointed part."

THE Major could not stop them, He stood on one side and watched them depart. Unconsciously his hand went to the brim of his helmet in a salute of admiration and respect. Armed only with rusty digging tools and broken spears they passed out of the village, across the cleared space and vanished into the jungle beyond.

After their departure the carriers arrived with the last load of the Major's equipment and the stockade gates were closed. That done the Major made a tour of inspection. In the short time which had elapsed the women had accomplished a great deal, but the Major had no foolish illusions about the final outcome of the attack by disciplined men armed with rifles. The garrison might hold them off for a time—two hours at the outside; on the other hand, the soldiers might succeed in gaining their objective at the first rush. It would have been easier had Bushwidi's village been built after the fashion of other jungle villages. But there was no solidity about it. It was as flimsy and impermanent as a toy village of cardboard. It was built with the intention of being deserted at the first report of the presence of a hostile Belgian force in the district; and in Bushwidi's experience, all Belgian forces were hostile. Practically the only shelter from rifle fire was the trench work of the women; and that would be useless if the soldiers climbed the trees in the surrounding jungle, and fired on the defenders from those vantage points.

His inspection over the Major held a brief conference with Jim and the ten carriers.

"Now to your places," he concluded. "What the end of this will be, I do not know. Perhaps death—but we will die like men."

As they went off to relay his orders to the women the Major said to Jim:

"I'm glad I taught you how to shoot."

"*Wo-we,* Baas. But I have never shot such big game before. Where do I stand?"

"You don't, Jim," the Major retorted sharply. "You take cover behind that pile of skoff boxes and fire from there."

"And you, Baas? Where will you be?"

"Hereabouts, Jim," the Major replied evasively.

"Let Koba have one of your rifles, Baas. He would not hit anything, but at least he would make a courage-giving noise."

The Major shook his head.

"It will take more than noise to settle this *indaba,* Jim. No, he has his bow and spear; whoever he hits with them will, I think, die."

"The Billygees are long coming, Baas," Jim said. "Perhaps they are still looking

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for the two we met." He chuckled. "Some will find them in the land of spirits before this day's sun sets."

"You killed the other one, then," the Major said.

"But of course, Baas," Jim replied cheerfully. "And so there are two men whose bullets can not harm this people."

A succession of wild screams and the report of rifles threw the women into the appearance of a panic as they shepherded the children to the place of shelter which had been allotted to them. But that done they took their places with a calmness that would have done credit to warriors; they were prepared to fight like fiends for the lives of their children.

AFTER a pregnant silence, broken only by a baby's fretful whimpering, another burst of rifle fire sounded, followed by screams of pain, the shrill angry cries of age-thinned voices—then brutal jeering laughter. The old women had played their part and were now paying the penalty. That much the Major deduced from the sounds which came to him. But the wall of the jungle which faced the village was unmoved by the tragedies it hid; it was as placid as the surface of an ocean pool in whose inky depths a gigantic octopus battens on helpless victims.

The laughter sounded nearer and suddenly, at the shrill blast of a whistle, black soldiers appeared at various points about the edge of the clearing. They marched forward light-heartedly, carrying their rifles at the trail, converging on the silent village. They shouted obscene threats and made brutal jokes at the expense of their supposedly easy victims. At one point eight men marched in a compact group and on the points of their bayonets two of the brave old women were impaled. They flaunted them, making of them a banner of their evil intent.

"*Wo-we,*" Jim muttered. "They are not men. They are devils, why does not the Baas fire?"

But the Major held his fire for two reasons; first because he hoped that the Belgian officer would show himself and he wanted to kill that man with his opening shot—he surmised that that man would not be likely to expose himself once the trap was sprung. And also, the Major waited until the soldiers were within good range of the carriers' bows.

When that time came, he was accutely disappointed that the fat white man had not shown himself. But he dared not wait any longer and opened rapid fire on the soldiers, running from one point to another in order to create the illusion of several riflemen. And he did not miss his targets. Jim fired too; he handled his rifle, aimed and fired as if obeying the commands of an unseen instructor. Arrows *whirred* softly through the air from the carriers' bows and wherever they found a human billet they introduced death. Nor were the women idle. They threw all manner of missiles at the soldiers, doing little harm, but heightening the illusion that the village was defended by a strong force.

It was all a matter of seconds. At one moment the soldiers were advancing in careless confidence, the next moment they raced in a disorderly flight for the shelter of the jungle.

The women of the village were jubilant. They shouted until their voices were hoarse and ignoring the Major's orders they left their cover and danced madly about the place with their children. A volley from the jungle gave them fearful proof that the enemy was not defeated; it had only retired to lick the wounds which served to make it infinitely more dangerous and cruel.

The women and children fled back to their allotted places. But not all of them succeeded in reaching cover. Four or five of them dropped. It looked as if, tired of the day's work and play, they had dropped to the ground and slept where they fell. Bullets continued to thud into flesh which had lost all sense of feeling; they jerked at the impact of the bullets as if their limbs were twitching in the horror of nightmare.

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PRESENTLY the firing ceased and in the stillness which followed those in the village could hear the shrill whistle and the curses of the soldiers. The whistles sounded again and the soldiers were instantly silent, but when a fat four-year-old staggered from behind his shelter, intent on joining his mother who lay so still on the ground, a rifle spoke and the reunion of mother and son was consummated.

The Major cursed softly under his breath. That shot had been fired from a rifle of different calibre to those used by the soldiers, and he knew that the white officer had been guilty of wanton murder.

The Major shouted words of encouragement to the women; taking advantage of every scrap of cover he crawled to where the children were huddled. He told them a story or two to make them laugh and suggested games for the little ones to play. He comforted the girls and gravely discussed the position with the boys. When he left them, to crawl with exaggerated caution to where Jim awaited him, they smiled courageously in proof that he had destroyed their fears and selfish desires.

"Wo-we, Baas!" Jim exclaimed when the Major joined him. *"Must* you expose yourself to the guns of the Billygees? You must live—or we all die."

"I keep under cover, Jim," the Major replied tersely. "Besides—they are bad marksmen."

"Not so bad, Baas," Jim replied with a significant jerk of his head toward the dead. "But what now? I do not like this waiting."

"Yet we must wait, Jim and do nothing to provoke them to attack us. Now, knowing little of our numbers, they fear us."

"What we have done, we can do again, Baas."

The Major shook his head.

"No, it is not so easy. The first time they suspected nothing. The next time they will be on guard. So the longer they wait, the better chance we have of living. It may be that Bushwidi's warriors are already returning."

"Wo-we! And to what will they return, Baas? If we are silent they will walk into an ambush."

"I had not thought of that," the Major said with a frown. *"Au-a!* I am a fool, Jim."

He hurried away, yet went with care, to the nearest group of women. Nemusa, the head wife of the chief, was amongst them.

"Go and beat the signal drums, Nemusa," he ordered.

"They are tabu to us women, white man," she stammered.

"There is no tabu when death flies," he retorted. "Go and beat the drums."

She looked appealingly at the other women, but they averted their eyes. It is no light thing to break a tribal tabu. Ghostly fears are greater than the fear of reath.

"Come!" the Major said gently.

She followed him, crawling on hands and knees, to the hut which housed the drums. Their progress was like that of two slowly moving shadows. As they entered the hut it seemed that the woman's inborn fear would defeat her.

"You know the signal talk?" the Major questioned casually.

"A little, white man," she said in a dull monotone.

"Then tell the warriors to hasten their return. Tell—"

"Ai-e!" she interrupted. "I know what to tell them."

WITH trembling hands she took up the sticks and stood close to the drums. She stiffened, her lips compressed, her eyes closed. Her hands moved. She beat softly on the drums and their voice was no more than a faint whisper. But the whisper gave her courage; the voice of the drums increased in volume, it filled the hut, it found its way out through the open door and boomed its message over the jungle. She beat now like a woman

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inspired. There was something nobly dignified about her.

The Major left her, walking on tiptoe from the hut.

Outside there was nothing he could do. They could only wait. So he made his way once again to the children and sat with them, listening to the rhythmic booming of the drums.

A whistle, but faintly heard, sounded. A burst of rifle fire staggered the beat of the drums and a leaden hail swept the village, smashing through the flimsy wall of the hut of drums. Another and another volley. The drumming ceased—suddenly. The firing died away.

The Major crawled back to the hut. He found Nemusa sprawled lifelessly across the drums. Her body was riddled with bullets. She had broken the tabu and paid the penalty, but nothing could recall the message she had sent. She knew it would echo against the ears of those who would hasten their return. That knowledge had removed the bitterness from death.

As the Major emerged from the hut the white officer came to the edge of the jungle. Sheltering himself behind an old woman of the village, he shouted:

"Let us talk this matter over. I came to you as a friend—you throw death at me. But I am merciful. Deliver to me the white men and their black servants who have persuaded you to this evil against your overlords and——"

He was interrupted by the woman behind whom he sheltered:

"Do not listen to the Billygee. He lies. Death alone can save you from him. Kill him, white men. Let bullets from your guns pass through my heart to his. Kill."

Even in her extremity she was brave enough and had the cunning to deceive the Belgian officer. She had created the impression that there was more than one white man at the village. But the Major could not respond entirely to her appeal, although he knew a bullet from his rifle would bring her an easier death than the Belgian soldiers would mete out to her.

The Belgian was fat; the woman behind whom he sheltered was over thin. Twice the Major fired and was rewarded by a loud yell of pain as the white man dropped back to the cover of the jungle, his ribs scored by the Major's shots. At the same moment the woman dropped, her body riddled by the shots of the Belgian soldiers.

After that killing there was a long silence and the women told each other that the Billygees had departed.

"No," the Major told them, "they wait for darkness. But the darkness which aids them may, also, aid you. Some, at least, can find safety in the jungle."

But they refused to listen to him.

"We will not leave this place, white man," they said. "We wait here until our men folk—or death—finds us."

Knowing that nothing would move them, he outlined his plans for the night-time defense of the village.

V

THE sun set. A red haze misted the jungle's greenness, the light faded swiftly from the sky.

Once again the shrill whistle sounded and the soldiers opened fire. Judging from the angle of the shots, the Major knew the men were firing from the branches of trees, and from such fire the village defenders could find little shelter. Jim was put out of action by a bullet which creased his skull and another which tore an ugly wound in his thigh. As the Major bent to his assistance a shot pierced the brim of his helmet; another grazed his left shoulder, spinning him round like a top. He fell and for a little while fought in despair against the darkness of unconsciousness. Four of the carriers dropped, released from the load of life.

Had they wished, the soldiers could have wiped out every man, woman and child, but a village of dead was of no value to them. There is no market, even in the

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Congo, for dead women; there is no amusement to be gained from the torture of lifeless bodies.

With absolute darkness the firing suddenly ceased and the Major, he had defeated the threat of unconsciousness, gave the order for his plans to be put into effect. The wounded and children were taken into the huts. The women lined the stockade, a space of three or four feet separating them. There they waited in absolute silence—listening.

The Major and the surviving carriers waited in the center of the village. And they, too, listened.

At last one of the women sounded the arranged signal—the melancholy *tonk* of a bell bird—and the Major and his carriers hurried to her. They peered through the gaps in the stockade—but could see nothing. They could hear, though, the sound of men breathing, the sound of men walking cautiously over cleared ground.

The carriers loosed arrow after arrow into the darkness before them; the Major opened fire.

Yells sounded and the thud of falling bodies; then they heard the patter of naked feet as the attackers retired in complete disorder.

The Major and the six carriers retired to the center of the village and there was silence for a while, save for the groans of the wounded and the whimpering of frightened children.

Again a bell-bird *tonked*. Again the men ran to the woman who had given the signal. But at the very moment they opened fire the signal was given by three other women at widely separated points of the stockade. The thing the Major had feared had happened. The Belgian officer had split up his forces and had launched three separate attacks; the one to which the men had responded was only a feint. The yells of the soldiers as they stormed over the stockade, were yells of victory.

But the women fought with astonishing fury and the soldiers—they were not fighting to kill—were checked long enough at all points for the women to rally, as arranged, about the huts which housed the children and the wounded. There, with the Major and the carriers, they were prepared to make a last stand.

The darkness hid their movements, but it hid the attackers also.

A BALL of fire suddenly shot up into the air from behind one of the outlying huts. It described a sweeping parabola and came to the ground close to the Major. He hastily trampled it out before its light could expose the defenders to the soldiers. Other fire-balls followed the first. Some died out before they could do any harm. One fell short and exposed to the Major's fire the shadowy forms of the soldiers who were waiting to rush in and make an end. As they scattered to cover he fired three times—and three men fell.

One fire-ball fell on to the roof of the hut which housed the children and as the frantic mothers beat it out with their hands, the soldiers rushed to the attack, shouting exultantly, reminding each other that there was to be no killing. They wanted to take living prisoners who, they loudly gloated, would beg for death to release them.

Discarding his rifle, the Major opened fire with a revolver and checked the rush of the men immediately in front of him. But the others surged forward and he was presently the center of a struggling mass of humanity.

A whistle sounded an urgent signal from the darkness beyond the village. It was repeated again and again. The Major heard it and wondered at its portent. But the soldiers ignored it. Victory, and all that victory meant to them, was in their grasp and they had no intention of letting it slip from them. They laughed as they fought, for they had little to fear. The carriers could no longer use their bows, nor the white man his gun. And there was only *one* white man where they had

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expected to be opposed by several. True, this one white man fought with the strength of ten—but he was weakening; blood oozed from a shoulder wound, his face was cut and bruised.

The whistle sounded again and again. And then, sounding fearfully above the cries of the women and the noise of the struggle came piercing, agonizing screams. It was the fat white man's voice, and it was filled with fear and pain.

The soldiers' attack slackened; their morale was shaken and they gave way a little as the Major launched a fierce coun-

struggle came piercing, agonizing screams. It was the fat white man's voice, and it was filled with fear and pain.

The sound of rifle shots came from the jungle, accompanied by the voice of another white man shouting encouragement.

HEARTENED by the thought of unexpected reinforcements the soldiers returned to the attack. A bayonet pierced the Major's side, sliding between his ribs. As he dropped, Kabo stood over him using the white man's discarded rifle as a club, until a cunningly flung knife found his heart and he fell—his big body completely shielding the Major.

The exultant yells of the soldiers at the Major's fall were silenced by the shouts of Bushwidi's warriors who, with Bushwidi himself and a white man at their head, raced out of the darkness of the jungle and poured over the stockade into the village and the light of burning huts.

The women—for to their men must go the victory—fled to their huts, the soldiers turned, bravely enough, to meet death.

VI

THE Major opened his eyes wearily and stared up at the canvas roof of his tent. His body ached, there was a dull pain in his shoulder. He wondered vaguely who had dressed his wounds. He wondered what had been the outcome of the fight, and why he was alive and, apparently well-cared for. He thought of Jim, and groaned.

"That is better."

He turned his head slowly and saw a white man, dressed in the uniform of the Belgians.

"Who are you?" he asked, his eyes clouding.

"I am Gautier—Lieutenant Gautier, sir," the other replied in faultless English.

"Well?" the Major demanded curtly. "What do you plan to do with me?"

"I have included an account of your brave and chivalrous conduct in my report to headquarters, sir. If there is anything you desire—you have only to command."

The Major stared at him incredulously.

"I do not understand," he stammered. "It is a child's game to make fun of a helpless man."

"It is simple—and yet not simple, sir," Gautier replied. "You know that Bushwidi led his warriors to attack and destroy a Belgian officer who was accompanied by only twelve soldiers. I am that officer."

"But you live," the Major exclaimed.

"Yes, I live. Thanks to Suzette."

"Suzette? A white woman—here?"

"No, she is Bushwidi's daughter. She was known to us by that name. My late superior had abducted her and kept her for a time in his hut. But he gave her to me, and she is very fond of me——" He was embarrassed by the Major's cold stare, but continued— "and when she accompanied me on this trip she told me it was Estrange's plan to use me as bait to lure Bushwidi away from his village. I was to be a decoy. She heard it all, listening outside the hut while he and Sergeant Talashio made their plans."

"So Belgian officers are accompanied on their patrol by native women!" the Major commented ungraciously.

Gautier flushed.

"That is unjust, sir. I have no control

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over the girl's feelings. I have been kind to her—she is only a child—especially kind because my superior used her so brutally. I brought her with me in order to return her to her people."

"I am sorry," the Major apologized. "I had no right to jump to conclusions."

"I cannot be resentful, sir," Gautier said bitterly. "I feel that I am smirched with the evil committed by my late captain."

"He is dead then?"

GAUTIER nodded.

"While the soldiers were attacking last night he remained in the jungle; he would—he would not risk his precious skin. I think, too, that he was wounded."

"He was," the Major said grimly.

Lieutenant Gautier nodded.

"I couldn't be sure, sir," he said. "As a matter of fact his body was almost unrecognizable. You see, two or three old women took him by surprise and—well, I think he paid for a great deal of the misery he had caused before he died. He was not a pleasant sight, I assure you." The lieutenant shivered. "But I can feel no

sorrow for him, he deserved his fate. We arrived too late to save him—even had I been so disposed. Even if we had arrived in time, I do not think Bushwidi would have permitted me to interfere with the women's vengeance."

"You were with Bushwidi?" the Major said wonderingly.

"But yes. You see, last night the girl read the signal of the drums and knew that Bushwidi was bringing his warriors in search of us—so we hastened to meet him, the girl going on ahead. She had some difficulty in persuading her father that I was not—how do you put it?—tarred with the same brush as Estrange, and that I, and my men, were being used by Estrange as an innocent decoy. Fortunately the signal drums from the village sounded at the right moment. Bushwidi believed her then. We joined forces with him and raced as fast as we could through the jungle, hoping to get here before it was too late. It was a near thing. But for you, sir, it would have been too late."

"You mean," the Major exclaimed, hardly able to believe the evidence of his ears, "that you and your men joined forces with Bushwidi against your superior officer?"

"But yes. Of course, sir. I have no regrets. It was men like Estrange and the soldiers he commanded who have done so much to bring our rule in the Congo into disrespect with the civilized world. He belongs to an old, dark order—I to a new. I have no fear of the consequences of my actions. I am supported by men in high authority. Even if that were not so—I should still have no regrets.

"But now I must leave you. You are over tired. It is best that you sleep and not trouble your mind with these things. But before you sleep you will, perhaps, wish to speak to your Hottentot servant. I will call him."

He went to the tent opening, hesitated and turned back to the Major.

"There is one thing, sir," he said, "I should like you to know. In my report to my headquarters I have given your name as John Smith and have described you as a short, dark complexioned man. I hope you do not mind. You see, we have been requested by the British Government to arrest a man answering to your description and I did not wish to cause you any annoyance."

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He saluted and left the tent.

A moment later Jim hobbled into the hut.

"How goes it, Baas?" he asked.

"Well, Jim," the Major replied happily. "And you?"

"Well, Baas. But, *au-a!* You have been asleep a long time. I thought you dead. For two days you did not open your eyes. But the young Billygee said you would live. He is a man, that young one, Baas."

"A man indeed, Jim. But how went the fight, Jim? What was the end?"

"It is best that you sleep, Baas."

"Tell me, Jim," the Major insisted.

"*Wo-we,* Baas. In the days to come Bushwidi's people will remember—and mourn. Many women were killed during the fighting. The count is twenty-five dead—women and children. Only four carriers live and they wounded. Kabo is dead. His body covered yours, else you must have died too, I think.

"But the people can not think of death now, Baas. They celebrate a victory. And with good cause. Truly with good cause. But for you there would now be no women or children alive in this place. Because of you all the children—save the three who were killed at the beginning—live, and there remains to each warrior at least one wife and unmarried women a-plenty. *Wu!* And the fat Belgian and all the black dogs who followed him are dead. Truly the people of Bushwidi have cause for celebration."

"But, Jim," the Major said unbelievingly, "I hear no sound of feasting, no drumming."

"And will not, Baas. When the young Billygee told Bushwidi that the drumming would disturb your sleep, Bushwidi ordered that there should be no drumming. They dance, Baas, to the soft beat of hands; their voices are muted."

The Major's eyes glistened.

"Tell them to drum and sing, Jim," he said. "It is an order. I will sleep the sounder for it—knowing that great fear has been removed from me. Their laughter shall be my lullaby. I think——"

His voice trailed off into silence. His eyes closed and he slept easily, dreamlessly.

Jim looked down at him for a moment then tip-toed out of the tent. Waiting for him there was Bushwidi, his gray-bearded advisers and all the people of the kraal. Their eyes questioned him mutely.

"It is well with my Baas," he said softly. "The strength sleep has closed his eyes. In a few days he will walk amongst you again."

Murmuring soft thanks to whatever gods the white man served they went back to the village; and they sang soft chants which, had they reached the Major's ears, would have told him of the regard they had for him, cradling him on the strength of their gratitude and affectionate esteem.

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Black John Smith Proclaims Halfaday the Moralest Damn Crick in the Yukon

THE FORTY-NINER

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of Many Stories of the Outlaws of Halfaday Creek

I

"KNOW anyone name of Smith around yere?" Black John Smith turned from the bar where he and Old Cush had been heatedly discussing the relative merits of John L. Sullivan and James J. Corbett, and regarded the stranger who stood just within the doorway. He was an old man, tall and angular, with a droop to his powerful shoulders that bespoke many years of toil. A goatee, neatly trimmed to a point, matched in whiteness the mustache whose ends curved slightly upward against a pair of weather-beaten cheeks. A thin nose, hooked like a hawk's beak showed prominently beneath a pair of gray eyes that twinkled like twin points of steel from under their bushy white brows.

"The name," admitted Black John, with a smile that exposed white teeth behind his jet black beard, "has a sort of familiar sound. Would the party's front name be John?"

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"No," answered the stranger gravely. "It's Al—the one I'm huntin'. He's my son. Mine's Catteraugus."

"J'ine up," invited Cush. "The house is buyin' one."

When midway of the floor, without halting his advance to the bar, and with scarcely a perceptible turning of the head, the man's lips ejected a short brown jet that, with the accuracy of a well-placed bullet, landed squarely in the center of a spittoon that stood near the end of the bar.

"Would you mind," asked Black John respectfully, "rehearsin' that name of yourn agin? I don't rightly believe I ketched it."

"Catteraugus Smith," replied the man, ranging himself beside the other at the bar where Old Cush had already set out bottle and glasses.

"There's lots of Smiths on Halfaday," said Black John. "But Catteraugus, now! I don't rec'lect no Al, neither."

"My pappy was a York State man. He fit in the war, an' when it was over he married an' settled down in the Tennessee mountains. He named me fo' the place he come from. I went to Californy back in fo'ty-nine, an' when I come back I boughten mo' land, an' married my woman, an' then they found coal on the land, an' I don't farm no mo'."

"There's a few assorted Smiths on the crick, like Hank, an' Bert, an' Tom, an' Jim, but mostly us Smiths runs to John fer a front name—er did, till me an' Cush invented the name-can."

"The name-can?" queried the other, his brow furrowing.

"Yeah. There it sets on the end of the bar. You see, layin' up here next to the bound'ry, like we do, Halfaday is a kind of a Mecca, you might say, fer some of the boys that's wanted, here an' there, fer one thing an' another. We've had 'em from as clost as Dawson, an' as fer away as Massachusetts. I'm an Alasky wanted, myself—h'isted an army payroll off'n a major an' three common soldiers over to Fort Gibbon, a few years back. Most of the boys arrives here with the mistaken notion that their name is John Smith, it bein' a good old fambly name, an' the first one they could think up. But the habit had a tendency to cause confusion that would of bordered on actual chaos if we hadn't thought of the name-can, which is a simple device an' as near fool-proof as any invention kin be, consistin' merely of copyin' the names out of a hist'ry book which One Eyed John Smith left behind when we hung him one time, onto slips of paper an' puttin' the slips in that molasses can that sets there on the bar. Now when anyone reaches here with the information that his name is John Smith, we invite him to dip in the can an' help hisself to a more distinctful name. He don't need to fear no consequences, 'cause most of the folks whose names we borrowed is ondoubtless dead, but to make sure—we mixed up the front an' hind names on the slips till their own mother wouldn't know 'em."

"It looks like a good idee," opined Catteraugus, "An' now, if you ge'men will allow me, I'll buy a li'l drink."

"You won't be interfered with," grinned the other, "an' I might add that my name's John Smith—Black John, by way of warnin' onobservant folks that that's the color of my whiskers. Lyme Cushing is the party's name behind the bar."

I'M RIGHT proud to meet up with y'all. I reckon if most of the folks yere is—er—outlawed, like you might say, a man might kind of suffer from murder, er robbery, er some such orneriness."

"Not in a thousan' years! Halfaday is the moralest damn crick in the Yukon. We don't want the police snoopin' around here, so we don't permit nothin' bein' pulled off that would fetch 'em in. Murder, an' all forms of larceny, claim-jumpin' an' general skullduggery is promptly dealt with by miners' meetin'——"

"Miners' meetin', eh!" exclaimed the oldster, his keen eye lighting with interest.

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"Now yer talkin'! We used to hold 'em out in Californy, back in fo'ty-nine. Hung a sight of folks, too—caché robbers an' sich varmints. One good miners' meetin'll make more Christians than fo'ty camp meetin's."

"Shore as hell!" agreed Black John heartily. "An' they stay Christian, too. There's damn little indoosement to backslidin' to see some feller you know'd hangin' there on the end of a rope. Yer a right-thinkin' man, Catteraugus. I'm buyin' a drink. An' now, if a man might ask, howcome yer huntin' yer son up here on Halfaday? Seems like it lays quite a ways back from Tennessee."

"Yes suh. That's right. But us Smiths is what you might say, loose-footed folks. My pappy's gran'pappy, he immigrated out to York State when that part of it wasn't nothin' but Indians an' trees. An' then pappy's pappy he went off to sea, an' he must of sunk somewheres, 'cause he ain't never come back yet. An' then pappy he went an' fit in the war. An' me, I hit out fer Californy when the talk run to gold out there. So I figgered Al would go a long ways, onct he got started—'specially with the shuriff after him like he was. Bein' as Al had often heer'd me talkin' about them gold days, I figgered he'd prob'ly hit out fo' this yere Klondike country we be'n hearin' about."

"You say the sheriff's after him?" asked Black John casually.

"No. I said he *was*. They've got a new shuriff now. I don't rightly know what he's doin' about it. I come away, after shootin' the other one. He had Al cornered in a coal bank; an' I aimed to give the boy a chanct. It's all on account of them damn Deetses. He's a good boy, Al is—kind of prankful, that's all." The old man's eyes took on a far-away reminiscent expression, as his long, strong fingers toyed with his liquor glass. "I rec'lect the time he beat up the schoolmaster. He wasn't only fifteen, an' the schoolmaster was a Deets man, an' he didn't like Al, nohow. One evenin' he kep' him after school fo' the purpose of floggin' him fo' some prank, an' Al watched his chanct an' laid him a crack side of the head with a stove chunk, an' then he beat him up till there wasn't hardly anyone thought he'd live—but he did. He quit the mountains, though—an' Al he quit school. Them Deetses is upity folks. They're Dimmecrats, an' between 'em they run a store, an' a tan-yard, an' a grist-mill, an' a stave-mill, an' they tried to make trouble fo' Al on account of the schoolmaster. But Al he laid clost till it blow'd over—helpin' me around the still an' such like. Then one night, jest to show them Deetses they wasn't so much, he slipped down an' robbed old Clay Deets's sto'. I told him he might git in trouble that-a-way, but like I said, Al he's young an' pranky. Old Clay, he set the shuriff on him, an' one day he ketched Al wearin' a suit of clo's he tuk out of the sto' that night, an' he tuk Al to town an' stuck him in the jail house. But nothin' come of it. I went down to the trial an' set there where the jury could git a good look at me, an' they decided there wasn't no evidence, an' turned Al loose—which is jist as well they did, as it would of turned out.

NOT long after that they found where a big vein of coal run under our land, an' we give up stillin' on account of the coal royalties the Company was payin' us. I reckon we got mo' money comin' in now than all them damn Deetses—an' they got to work fo' theirn, an' we don't.

"It run along an' this spring young Valandingham Deets give out that he was goin' to run fo' the legislat'r, come fall, in place of old man Fannin. When Al heered about it he 'lowed there wasn't no mo' reason a Deets should be in the legislat'r than a Smith. So he set up to run agin Val Deets on the Republican idee that a damn Dimmycrat ain't got no business to be 'lected, nohow. The campaign run along into the fo' part of the summer, with Val Deets makin' speeches all through the mountains—an' Al puttin' out a heap of

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money buyin' up votes. Val, he'd be'n off to some school somewheres—Knoxville, er mebbe Chattenoogy—an' he began belittlin', an' makin' light of Al in his speeches. When Al found out about it, he loaded up the old rifle an' laid in the laurels. In a few nights he got his chanct an' ketched Val right plumb through the heart. It was as pretty a shot as a man would want to see, from where Al laid—an' the light he had. The bullet went in Val's back right in under the shoulder blade.

"Well, the shuriff was up fer 'lection, too—an' he figgered he better do somethin', what with all the Deetses pesterin' him about it, though God knows, Val wasn't no loss to no one but a Deets. So Al, he tuk to the mountains, 'lowin' to lay

low a few weeks till it blow'd over. But like I said, the shuriff stuck his nose in an' cornered Al in an old coal bank. Knowin' Al like I did, I realized he done it more as a prank than anythin' else—an' besides, it looked like Val was linin' up more votes than he was on account of the lies he was tellin' around. So I shot the shuriff an' told Al mebbe he better give up the idee of runnin' fer office till some other fall, an' kind of git out of the country fer a spell. He done so, an' I slipped over home an' give my woman a power of attorney to draw the royalties, an' I come away, too—till after 'lection when things quiets down in the mountains."

"H-u-u-m," said Black John. "An' what makes you think this heer prankful son of yourn is on Halfaday? You mentioned the Klondike. That's down around Dawson. It's more'n likely he's down there."

"No, Al ain't there. I be'n down to Dawson. Looked fo' him all amongst them camps, an' asked everyone I thought looked like he might know. When I mentioned to one man about the shuriff bedevilin' Al like he done, he says how if there's a shuriff after him, he's more'n likely hit fo' Halfaday Crick, as that's where most of 'em hits fo' when folks like police, an' marshals, an' shuriffs is on their trail. So I come here. Al, he's a good boy an' me, knowin' the temptations there is around minin' camps, I figgered I could mebbe kind of steer him straight. I wouldn't want he should git into no trouble."

YEAH," agreed Black John. "It would be a pity if he should git into trouble. Take boys that-a-way, I guess they're kind of hard to raise right. I never tried it myself—but my folks did, an' it seems like they didn't meet with no more than middlin' success. I couldn't say if Al is amongst us. If he is, he's ondoubtless livin' under some alias he draw'd out of the name-can. It don't look like there'd be much future fer a boy like Al on Halfaday, so why don't you jest hole up with me, an' stick around a spell an' kind of look the boys over? Everyone on the crick gits in here to Cush's about onct in so often."

"Well now, I sure take that kind of you. I don't like to put no one to any trouble ——"

"No trouble, at all, Catteraugus," interrupted Black John. "Me an' Cush'll do all we kin to help you locate yer son. From what you've told us it looks like mebbe he'd kind of be better off fer a guidin' hand. Jest throw yer stuff in my cabin yonder, an' come on back so we kin be gittin' on with our drinkin'."

II

WHEN the man had disappeared with his pack, Old Cush eyed Black John with twinkling eyes. "If this here Al's

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on Halfaday, I shore hope his pa locates him. Prankful—an' him beatin' that teacher damn near to death with a stove chunk, an' robbin' a store, an' bushwhackin' that feller from behind!"

"Yeah," grinned Black John, "them mountaineers is hardy folks, Cush. Even their light-heartedest pranks is liable to run into felonies. If Al's on the crick I'd shore like to know which one of the name-canners he is."

"It's comfortin' that his pa'll be here to pick him out. Like you said, they all come in the saloon every onct in so often."

"Yeah," agreed Black John, "an' election bein' over by this time back there in Tennessee, mebbe they'll be pullin' out fer home."

"I hope they will. It would be hell if a damn cuss like Al should settle down amongst us permanent."

"Yeah. Well, permanent as fer as he would be concerned, prob'ly wouldn't be no hell of a while on the calendar. Not if he pulled none of his pranks, it wouldn't. But if old Catteraugus stayed, too, he'd prob'ly exert a restrainin' influence, as a preacher would say."

"It don't look like he done a hell of a lot of restrainin' back there where they come from," argued Cush. "He even bragged about what a good shot this here Al made when he plugged that feller through the back. An' then him shootin' that shuriff an' all——"

"Well hell," interrupted Black John, "you can't blame a man fer takin' a little pride in his own son—an' you couldn't expect him to stand around an' see him git shot, neither. It looks like there's a prudish streak in you, Cush. I kind of like old Catteraugus. He didn't exactly condone these here felonious acts of Al's—he's jest tryin' to laugh 'em off an' make light of 'em. Here he comes, now. Fine lookin' old codger, ain't he?"

"Humph," grunted Cush. "What with them eyes, an' that eagle's beak he's got fer a nose—no wonder that jury decided there wasn't no evidence agin' Al, that time—an' him ketched with the clothes on him that he stole out of that store! Here comes One Armed John, too. He gits up an' down the crick considerable. Mebbe he could figger out which one of the name-canners would be Al."

"He might," admitted Black John, and turned to the two who had just entered the door. "Catteraugus, meet One Armed John Smith. John, that there's Catteraugus Smith, which he's come to Halfaday huntin' his son, Al."

"I don't know no Al Smith," said One Armed John, ranging himself at the bar between Black John and Catteraugus, as Old Cush set out the bottle and glasses. "But I jest come down from up the crick, an' yesterday that there Bert Smith shot Santa Houston. You know, they're them two kind of youngish chechakos that come to Halfaday a month er so ago."

"Shot him, eh?" observed Black John, returning his empty glass to the bar. "Did he make a thorough job of it?"

"I'll say he did. Houston's deadern hell. Bert, he claimed it was self-defense. But Houston's shot in the back."

"H-u-u-m," said Black John. "The case would bear lookin' into. We'll go on up an' investigate, an' if the circumstances warrants, we'll fetch this here Bert Smith down an' call a miners' meetin'."

"That's right," seconded Catteraugus. "That's the way we used to deal with killin's back in fo'ty-nine. Yes, suh—an' if it was murder, the killer was hung to the nearest tree jest as quick as the vote was took on it. There ain't nothin' like miners' meetin' to put the fear of God in the heart of a murderer."

"You bet!" agreed Black John. "There ain't no question but what they have a beneficial effect on a murderer, er a thief, er any other kind of a skulldug." He turned to One Armed John: "Where did this probable murder come off?"

"Well, Houston's layin' on his claim, near the crick an' right clost to his tent. His rifle's leanin' agin a guy rope, an' Bert Smith claims he was reachin' fer it

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when he plugged him. He might of be'n at that, but somehow it looks kind of like a set-up. Bert's claim lays right next to Houston's. Herman Miller an' that there Benjamin Cleveland, they've got claims down this way from Houston's, an' they didn't know nothin' about the killin' till I stopped in an' told 'em. They said Bert an' Houston had had several quarrels lately over a canoe."

BLACK JOHN turned to Old Cush. "You're the coroner, Cush. The case calls fer an inquest, an' if the circumstances p'ints to a crime, it's your duty to order the suspect fetched down here an' tried by miners' meetin'. Me an' One Armed an' Catteraugus will constitute the jury, in such cases made an' provided."

Old Cush frowned. "It'll take half a day," he objected, "an' I'd have to lock up the saloon, an' besides—them fellers is chechakos an' ain't be'n there long enough to of took out any dust to speak of. We prob'ly won't find enough on this here Houston to pay my fee, let alone what I'll lose by lockin' up fer half a day."

"There'll be the two estates to pick from," retorted Black John. "It looks like their combined assets had ort to reimburse you fer whatever loss you sustain."

"Two estates?"

"Why, shore. There ain't a chanct in a thousan' that we won't be hangin' Bert Smith. That'll make his effects available as well as Houston's."

"That's so," admitted Cush. "Well, let's be gittin' along so's we kin git back before dark. I wouldn't want to miss the night trade."

III

THE four arrived at the adjoining claims of the two chechakos to find the killer explaining to Miller and Cleveland the reason for his act, and the manner of its accomplishment.

The steely gaze of the eagle-beaked old mountaineer dwelt for a single instant on the corpse, and swept in a blaze of fury to the killer whose eyes seemed fairly popping out of his head as he stared into the face whose every hair of goatee, mustache, and beetling eyebrows seemed aquiver with hate. The oldster's gaze never left the man's face as he pointed a long forefinger at the dead man.

"Damn you!" he cried, in a shrill falsetto. "You've killed my boy. My boy, Al! As good a boy as ever walked in shoe leather. I ort to kill you where you stand. But I know minin' camp law, an' I aim to abide by it. Miners' meetin'll 'tend to yo' case—an' all I ask is fo' the boys to let me haul on the rope!"

"He had it comin'," muttered the man sullenly. "He——"

"Shet up!" ordered Black John. "You'll be give a chanct to tell your side of it in miners' meetin', that is, providin' the coroner's jury arrives at the conclusion that this here corpse is dead." He turned to Cushing. "Call the inquest, Cush, an' we'll set on him."

Old Cush wangled the corner from a plug of tobacco, returned the plug to his pocket, and nested his quid firmly against his cheek. "Inquest's called," he announced. "All them present, except the one that killed him, is app'inted on the jury. Look the corpse over careful an' if you believe him dead, it's yer duty to pronounce him such, an' determine if possible what he died of. An' in case you was to conclude that such demise was brought about by someone else, it's yer further duty to order such other person, if any, to be took down to the saloon an' tried fer the murder by a miners' meetin'."

Gathering close about the body, the jury accorded it a perfunctory examination and, acting as spokesman, Black John reported to Cush: "This here corpse, to wit, formerly alias Santa Houston——"

"Hold on," interrupted Catteraugus. "His name ain't Santy Houston. It's Al Smith, an' I'd ort to know, 'cause he's my own son. An' not only that, but he's wearin' that same coat I was tellin' you

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about him stealin' out of old Clay Deets's store that time. It was a good coat onct, an' now look at it—what with bullet holes, an' blood an' all! That Santy Houston name he must of draw'd out of that can."

"All right," replied Black John. "We'll begin over. This here corpse, havin' be'n dooly identified as onct belongin' to one Al Smith of Tennessee, a man of good character——"

"Well," interrupted Catteraugus, "I wouldn't hardly go so fer as to say that Al had his faults—if he was my own son."

"A MAN of good character, barrin' certain faults," continued Black John, "is hereby pronounced dead; such death bein' the direct an' continuous result of a bullet fired from a rifle held in the hands of one, to wit, alias Bert Smith, with malice aforethought an' homicidal intent, to boot. Said rifle bullet ketchin' said Al Smith in the back in under his left shoulder blade an' goin' on through him, thereby causin' his death. Therefore the jury recommends an' orders that the said alias Bert Smith be hereby forcibly seized an'

fetched down to Cush's saloon an' tried by a dooly called miners' meetin' an' hung fer such murder. The prisoner is hereby remanded to the custody of me an' Catteraugus Smith fer delivery to the saloon."

"Inquest's adjourned, an' jury dismissed," announced Old Cush, "an' I now app'int the rest of the jury to skuttle around an' collect whatever they kin find of property an' effects that formerly belonged to the deceased an' the prisoner."

"How about the funeral?" asked Catteraugus.

"The which?" asked Black John, eyeing the oldster with a quizzical frown. "Oh—you mean fer the corpse?"

"Yes, suh—certainly. Don't you bury the dead up yere?"

"Shore, we bury 'em all right—but the facts is, we ain't what you might say long on funerals on Halfaday. In fact, I don't believe we ever had what you could rightly call a bang-up funeral. Mostly there ain't no regrets connected with a demise up here, except such as is occasioned by the bother we're put to in diggin' the grave. Of course, when one of the more notorious of us dies er gits hung er somethin', we bury him in the graveyard down to the fort, an' burn his name er his alias into a slab. But even in such cases, we don't hold no reg'lar funerals."

"I'd kind of like fo' Al to be buried in a reg'lar grave yard," said the oldster wistfully.

"Well, bein' as this is the first time any relative of a deceased has be'n present, I'm inclined to agree with you. I'll app'int Miller an' Cleveland to fetch the corpse down. They kin load it in the canoe yonder. We always keep a few graves dug ahead down to the fort—in case of emergency. Al kin have one of them. Come on, let's git goin'."

Catteraugus picked up the rifle that leaned against the guy rope of the tent—the rifle for which Bert Smith said the victim had been reaching—and nested its barrel in the crook of his left arm as the forefinger of his right hand caressed the trigger.

"Walk on ahead!" he commanded the prisoner. "An' remember—I'm jest a-hopin' you'll break fo' the bresh!"

IV

WORD passed up and down the creek, and by the following midforenoon, Cushing's saloon was crowded with men. For miners' meetin' was a serious affair on Halfaday, attendance being compulsory upon all who had been notified.

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Promptly at ten o'clock Black John thumped the bar with his fist. "Miners' meetin' called to order fer the purpose of tryin' one, to wit, alias Bert Smith, fer feloniously, an' with malice aforethought murderin' one Al Smith, a chechako, formerly know'd on Halfaday as Santa Houston—that bein' the name he draw'd out of the can. The *corpus delicti,* havin' be'n declared dead by a dooly app'inted coroner's jury, an' buried this mornin' by request of its pa, won't need to be produced fer evidence, the coroner's jury bein' able to testify that a rifle bullet fired by the defendant, went in his back an' come out his chest, killin' him in transit, as a lawyer would say.

"I'll app'int myself chairman of this meetin', an' warn you that it's yer dooty to listen to all the evidence, whether you believe it er not, an' to give the prisoner all the breaks you think he's got comin'. We'll start out with One Armed John—him bein' the first one, outside of the prisoner, to see the corpse."

One Armed John told of coming upon the corpse on his way down the creek, and that, upon inquiry, the prisoner, who was on the adjoining claim, told him that he had shot the man on the previous afternoon, in self-defense, as he was reaching for his rifle. The witness further testified that he saw a rifle leaning against the guy-rope of deceased's tent in such a position that the dead man might well have been reaching for it when he was shot. Also, the witness pointed out, it may well have been placed there after the shooting. He was followed on the stand by the two chechakos, Cleveland and Miller, who told of hearing several violent quarrels between the prisoner and the deceased relative to the ownership of a canoe. Old Cush followed with a brief summary of the findings of the coroner's jury.

WHEN he had finished Black John addressed the assembly. "You've heard the testimony agin the defendant who will now be give the chanct to offer any excuse he kin think up fer murderin' the deceased." He turned to the prisoner who had sat through the testimony in surly silence. "Stand up here in front of the bar. Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, er any part of it, s'el'p'e God?"

"Yes," answered the man sullenly.

"What's yer name?"

"Albert Smith."

"Did you shoot the deceased, to wit, one alias Santa Houston, later identified as Al Smith, through the back a couple of days ago on his claim?"

"Yes."

Black John glowered at the man. "You'd better talk faster'n that if you don't want to git hung. I'm givin' you fair warnin' that so many men has be'n hung from that rafter under which yer standin' that this room wouldn't hold even their ghosts. Besides which, Pot Gutted John there is already tyin' the noose. Believe me, if I was in your shoes I'd have a string of mitigatin' an' extenuatin' circumstances thought up that would take from now till supper time to tell 'em. Go ahead now, an' the glibber you talk the less liable you are to git hung—provided yer believed; which ain't likely."

"Well," began the man, eyeing the assembly with sullen defiance, "it all started over the canoe. We bought it in partnership to fetch our stuff up to the claims with. Then we agreed to flip a coin fer it. He done the flippin', an' I called tails. Heads come up, an' I says, 'horse on me,' an' he says, 'one flip is as good as a hundred.' The canoe's mine,' he says. I claimed that flippin' was always the best two out of three, but he wouldn't give in, an' fer a couple of days we had it back an' forth, callin' each other what names we could lay our tongue to, an' cussin' one another out. Then, day before yesterday evenin' he went to the crick an' started to drag the canoe out onto his claim. I warned him not to lay a hand on it, but he reached out fer it, an' when he seen that I'd throw'd down on him with my rifle, he turned an' reached fer his own

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gun, which he'd set it close by the tent guy, where you seen it when you-all come up there. So I let him have it—an' that's all there is to it."

"H-u-u-m," said Black John, allowing his glance to travel over the faces of the assembled miners, "there's an interestin' an' intricate p'int involved in this here case that has got to be give due consideration. You men has got to deliberate, pro an' con, on whether, in coin-flippin', the first throw wins, er as this here defendant contends, it takes two out of three throws to win. We all know that in shakin' dice, the custom of the country calls fer the best two out of three shakes. But coin-flippin' is inherently different, an' you've got to remember that a neck depends on your decision. Inasmuch as dust takes the place of coins in this country, coin-flippin' is seldom if ever resorted to, but an' at the same time we've got to admit that it is a reasonable an' dependable method of decidin' an argument. We don't want to make no mistake in our decision of this p'int, which it is the crux of this whole hangin', if any. We'd feel kind of cheap if we was to decide that the deceased was correct in his contention that one flip wins; an' then later we was to find out that in coin-flippin' communities, the rule called fer two out of three. An' layin' aside our own embarrassment over the matter, we must remember that it makes even more difference than that to the prisoner. I'm jest callin' attention to this p'int, so you'll give it due thought.

"But there's another p'int that should be brought up which, while it don't pertain to the actual killin', prob'ly shows a depraved attitude of mind, an' a gross disregard of what might be called the ettycut of murder. You men know as well as I do that in murder, as well as anything else, the right-thinkin' man will observe certain obvious niceties—I refer to the defendant leavin' his corpse lay where it was at durin' one night an' the parts of two days, entirely disregardful of the fact that if a police should of happened along instead of One Armed John, it would have made it mean fer all of us. It would of meant an investigation, besides givin' Halfaday the reputation of bein' a crick which is strewn with corpses. An' as you all know, such reputation might have a tendency to keep the better element away. An' I'm warnin' you men right here an' now that in order to prevent corpse-leavin' becomin' prevalent on Halfaday, I'm hereby an' from now on incloodin' it in the skulldruggery law." He turned abruptly upon the prisoner. "Why didn't you either bury yer corpse er report his demise so proper steps could be took in its disposal?"

THE man shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't give a damn. It was him or me—an' I beat him to it."

"Well, men," began Black John, after a moment of silence, "you've all heard the evidence, pro an' con, an' it's yer dooty to render a verdick in conformity therewith."

"Jest a minute," interrupted a voice, and all eyes turned to Catteraugus, who was rising slowly to his feet. The picture of sorrow and dejection, he had occupied a chair during the proceedings, drawn close beside a card table upon which he had rested his elbows with his face buried in his hands. The powerful shoulders drooped, and the man regarded Black John with lack-luster eyes from which all the fire had died. "I'm jest wonderin', suh, if an old man who cain't help but feel an interest in this yere case, would be allowed to say a few words?"

"Shore, Catteraugus," assented Black John, "jest go right ahead. But I warn the boys that, out of fairness to the prisoner who's in a hell of a fix as it is, onless what you've got to say is evidence bearin' direckly on the case, they've got a right to disregard it."

"Well, ge'men, it is; an' it ain't," began the oldster, his eyes roving slowly over the faces of the crowd. "As y'all know, that was yere to the funeral this mornin', the deceased was my son, Al. It's mighty

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hard fo' a man to lose his only boy. An' yeste'day when I seen him layin' there dead, the devil riz up within me an' demanded vengeance. But, ge'men, that was yeste'day. Sence then, I've had time to study the whole thing out. I rec'lected that place in the Good Book where it says, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' An' in studyin' back over Al's past, I seen where there was times when, mebbe, he hadn't done jest the right thing. It ain't easy fo' a man to speak ill of his boy—an' him dead. But I rec'lected certain acts an' doin's of Al's that might be regarded as oversteppin' the bounds of mere prankishness. An' the mo' I studied it, the mo' I got to thinkin' that mebbe there might be somethin' in this yere prisoner's defense—an' sence I heard what he had to say, I'm convinced that there is. In the

first place, ge'men, knowin' Al like I do, an' his ability with a rifle, I know that if Al's rifle stood where we seen it standin' agin' that guy rope, an' him reachin' fo' it, like the prisoner says; then if he hadn't shot jest when he did, it would be Al we was tryin' fo' murder instead of him. Al would of plugged him shore. He wouldn't never of missed at that range.

"An' in the second place, ge'men, in jestice an' fairness to the prisoner, I've got to admit that he's right in contendin' that in coin-flippin', it's the best two out of three that wins—the same as in dice-shakin'. Ge'men, I come from a coin-flippin' country, an' I know the rules an' the customs—an' so did Al. Now I ain't claimin' nor admittin' that Al would steal a canoe—but I do claim that he know'd he was cheatin' when he didn't flip that coin ag'in. Al know'd it. An' the prisoner here, know'd it. Therefore, ge'men, under the circumstances, even though Al's my own son, if we was to hang this man fo' what he done, I wouldn't never rest easy in my mind about it, 'cause I know Al was in the wrong, an' I know he'd shot the defendant, if he'd got holt of his rifle. That's all, ge'men. I'm thankful to y'all fo' hearin' me out."

AS THE man resumed his seat Black John combed at his beard with his fingers. "You've heard what Catteraugus had to say, an' it's up to you to vote. All in favor of hangin' the said defendant, to wit, Bert Smith, er alias Bert Smith fer the murder of said Al Smith, signify by sayin' 'Aye.'"

Silence followed the words, as men glanced uneasily into each other's faces.

"Contrary—'No.'"

A scattering of "nos" responded, but it was evident from the volume that most of the occupants of the room had refrained from voting.

Black John turned to the prisoner. "You've heard the vote, an' I might add that yer damn lucky to git off without a hangin', which as anyone kin see at a glance, you ondoubtless deserve. You kin lay yer acquittal to old Catteraugus, there—an' nothin' else. But an' however—you ain't plumb out of the woods, yet. Corpse-leavin' havin' be'n brought under the head of skullduggery, as you ondoubtless took notice of—an' you, bein' a corpse-leaver by yer own admission, yer thereupon guilty of skullduggery, which is a hangable offense on Halfaday. But bein' as the corpse got eventually buried without no more inconvenience than a funeral, an' bein' as the offense was brought under the skullduggery act, *ex post facto*, as a lawyer would say, I deem that a hangin' in this case might be a mite drastic. Nevertheless, we don't aim to allow no habitual corpse-leaver to remain on Halfaday, so I propose that you be give till four o'clock

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this afternoon to git to hell off the crick." He paused and swept the assembly with a glance. "All in favor of the verdick as I jest outlined it, signify by sayin' 'Aye.'"

A thundering chorus of "Ayes" filled the room, and without a word the prisoner turned and made his way hastily to the door, through a lane opened to give him passage.

DRINKS were had, and the crowd gradually dispersed, leaving Black John and Old Cush alone in the barroom. Old Cush glanced at the clock.

"Four o'clock," he announced. "I s'pose by this time that there Bert Smith has left the crick."

"Yeah," agreed Black John, "it's more'n likely."

"That was a fine speech old Catteraugus made," opined Cush. "You've got to hand it to him fer bein' fair an' square—what with Al bein' his own son, an' all."

"Yeah. It was a good speech. A man might say it was a masterful one."

"That's right. Hadn't be'n fer him comin' out that-a-way, the prisoner'd of be'n convicted. I kin always tell how the vote's goin' by jest watchin' the boys' faces."

"Yeah. It was Catteraugus saved him, all right. You've got to hand it to them old forty-niners."

"I s'pose he's down there in your shack now, a sorrowin', all by hisself. Go on down an' fetch him up, John. We'll slip a few drinks into him, an' kind of cheer him up."

"I don't expect he's down there," said Black John.

"Well, where else would he be? I ain't seen him sence the meetin'."

"No—an' that ain't all. I've got a hunch we won't be seein' him no more."

"Why—why?"

"Well, he done what he come here to do—he found his boy. An' the election bein' over an' all—back there in the mountains—I reckon he's on his way to Tennessee, right now."

V

THREE months later, as Black John entered the saloon one morning, Old Cush tossed a letter onto the bar.

"Red John fetched up the mail from Dawson," he said. "An' this was in it. It's fer you, an' it's from somewheres in Tennessee. I wonder if it would be from Catteraugus?"

"I wouldn't wonder," said Black John, slitting the envelope with his knife. "Yup—that's who it's from. Here's what he says:

Dear John:

I take my pen in hand to let you know I went huntin' this mornin' an' got two turkey. Likewise, the Republicans won the election like I figgered they would, an' the new shuriff ain't bothered me none about shootin' the other one that had Al cornered, that time. He was a damn Dimmycrat, anyhow. Speakin' of Al reminds me that I kind of put one over on you boys up to Halfaday. When me, an' you, an' Cush an' One Armed John went up to investigate that killin', I seen at onct that, what with the dead man bein' shot in the back, an' all—the one that done it wouldn't stand no show in miners' meetin'. So I claimed he was my son, Al—instead of which Al was the one that done the killin'. He'd pulled another one of them pranks that was always gittin' him in trouble, one way an' another. Al's right name is Albert—down yere he's know'd as Al, whilst up there on Halfaday they used the hind end of his name an' called him Bert. I seen how I had a bare chanct to git Al off if I could make a speech fer the prisoner, with the boys all believin' that the murdered man was my own son. I had consid'ble to do with miners' meetin's in Californy, back in forty-nine, savin' not only myself a couple of times, but also some others, by quick thinkin' an' fast talkin'. Mind, I ain't upholdin' Al's murders—but blood's thicker'n water, as the sayin' goes. It was kind of up to me to

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save the boy from gittin' hung, if I could. I don't know who the other one was—the one Al shot—so if you want to, you kin take down that slab with Al's name burnt into it. If you was here, I'd buy a drink. Hopin' you feel the same I remain y'rs truly,

Catteraugus Smith

"Well—I'll be damned!" exclaimed Old Cush. "Think of that old cuss puttin' it over on us that-a-way!"

A slow grin widened behind Black John's beard. "He didn't put nothin' over on me," he said. "I know'd it all the time."

"You know'd it! An' you let him git away with it!"

"Shore, Cush. Why not? I kind of liked old Catteraugus. He was a game old sport—tryin' to make the most of a son like Al, which he was prob'ly as no-count an' worthless an' crooked a scoundrel as ever walked in shoe leather. Catteraugus know'd it, too—but he never let on. An' when the time come, he saved him. An' I let him do it. Hell Cush, you can't hang a man right in front of his own pa! No matter how ornery he is, you can't. But you notice, I took damn good care Al didn't stay on Halfaday."

"That's right. But how'd you know this here Bert was his son?"

Black John's grin widened. "I seen the look that passed between 'em when we got up to them claims. Old Catteraugus give this Bert a mighty meanin' wink—an' Bert, his eyes was fairly poppin' out of his head at sight of the old man. You see, he didn't know he was within three thousan' miles of Halfaday. Then I kind of sized 'em up together—same hooked nose, same shaped ears, same colored eyes. Only their eyes was different—there was humor in Catteraugus's eyes. Bert had the hard, cold eyes of a killer."

"That's right," agreed Old Cush. "I took notice of them eyes of Bert's. They was about as friendly as a snake's. Say—there's somethin' else wrote on t'other side of that last page. I kin see it from here. Turn it over an' read it."

"That's right," agreed Black John, turning over the sheet. "P. S. it says. *'Speakin' of Al, I fergot to say he was killed a couple of weeks back. One of them damn Deetses laid in the laurels an' shot him in the back when he was passin' by. I was huntin' Deetses when I got them two turkey, this mornin'. Better luck next time—an' hope your the same.*

"'Catteraugus.'"

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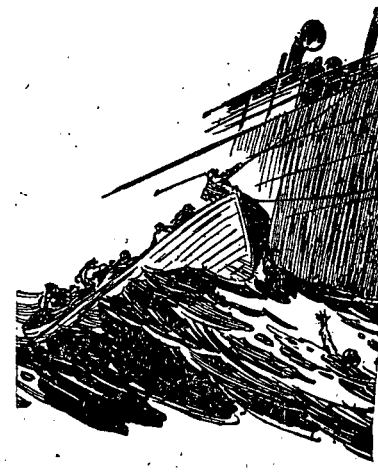
THICK WEATHER



By BERTON E. COOK

Author of "Trial By Sight," "Cargo Awash," etc.

CAPTAIN Thurber Hanley stole a quick glance into the southeast. His eyes were furtive.

Now nautical eyes are normally bold, not furtive. They are thorough. They sweep the zenith, the distant horizon, the measureless sea. They challenge.

But Captain Hanley's glance had been no challenge at all to what threatened in the southeast; it had been too hurried, too furtive to gauge the weather rolling in upon his ship.

Nor did he get away with it. Joe Lette's double-barbed words came stabbing over his brassbound shoulder: "Looks mighty like thick o' fog there, sir."

So! Lette, the self-appointed sleuth, the coveter of command; Lette, the *Daniel Boone's* executive officer, had been watching him all the while! Lately it seemed to Thurber Hanley that he always was watching, always reaching for command of the *Daniel Boone.* Thurber Hanley could feel this man lately, somehow he swarmed all over him like a silent, incurable rash. That was Joe Lette's way of working on any man who stood in his way.

Captain Hanley had no illusions about the grandeur of his position; it was his nemesis, instead. Gladly he would have turned the big trans-Atlantic liner over to another master a dozen times—a thousand times. But how could he? Quit the top berth on a liner at his youthful age? He'd be disgraced for life. Above all, he couldn't endure the thought of being supplanted by the likes of a Joe Lette.

So he summoned every flagging atom of will power against quitting, against Lette's hovering greed, and against that awful dread of thick weather that had made him lately what he was. He forced himself to look again into the southeast, knowing that Lette was watching him do it.

A faint, mirthless grin curled Lette's thin lips. Couldn't deceive Joseph Lette that easily; he devined the struggle going on inside the Old Man, he knew what this show of false courage amounted to—hadn't he put the Old Man on the spot

Captain Thurber Hanley Pays a Debt at Sea; and Also Becomes Master of His Own Courage

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this way a score of times? It had been he who first detected the fog off there, and to prod his prey he exclaimed, "God, but it's thick!"

THURBER HANLEY felt abruptly cold. "Almost black," he managed to agree. "Well, got to expect it along here this time of year." He hoped his words had sounded casual . . . to his utter undoing came blobs of nervous sweat down his cheeks. He caught Lette's gloating eyes on them and added, "Muggy. Fog always is like that or else——"

"Or cold," Lette cut in. "Y'know, fog and them snowstorms, they ain't so dif-f'rent."

Blind rage sent Thurber Hanley across the bridge. He despised Lette and his inferential tongue. Aye, Lette never forgot the turmoil in the Old Man's soul, never lost the opportunity to hammer on it like a beginner on a broken piano key.

Suddenly Hanley's rage dissolved, only to be supplanted by his old fear—and a new fear that his men were catching onto it. He quit the bridge while the weather was yet clear. And his broad back was scarcely turned ere Lette bent a wise glance upon the watch officer. "Old Man sure is cracking up, huh?" he confided. Then to himself added, "When he does burst, it'll be Cap'n J. P. Lette o' the *Boone*, and that sounds good!" A warm air of confident expectancy suffused the executive officer, he missed the penetrating nip of dank fog closing down upon him.

A stout chair creaked under the weight of Thurber Hanley. He sat hunched in a silent struggle that had come, like the cold weather of late, more and more frequently. A little, smothered groan escaped the man; he was pitting tattered pride, again, against that cursed fear—and losing as never before. To-day he admitted to a hopelessness.

He drifted onto the bald truth of it all. He, the fifth Thurber Hanley in a well-known lineage of sailing masters, was succumbing to the clever machinations of his executive officer. All because, eight months ago, he had rammed a stricken old clumsy freighter in a blizz—— "Good God, what was that noise?"

He lurched to his feet. "Cat—tle!" he gasped. He heard their baleful bawling, clashing horns, hoofs. Steel crunched into bending steel. It must be imagination, was he going mad?

Again that terrifying bellow . . . Thurber Hanley became abruptly ashamed of himself, standing there sole alone. He wiped sweat off his cheek, he sat down heavily. A cold shudder coursed through his vitals. The panic was gone; he recognized, now, that the "bawling" was the *Boone's* siren. The southeast fog mull had arrived.

But this particular fit of panic wasn't passing away so easily; a fit of nausea made him squirm in his chair—and he couldn't help realizing that at this very instant his ship was shooting some three thousand souls through blind fog.

Habit alone should have drawn him to the bridge, perhaps, but he stayed where he was while Joe Lette ran the *Boone*. It had happened this way several times of late.

Thurber Hanley dined alone in his quarters, that night. He sat oblivious to the world around him. No, this situation aboard the *Boone* could not go on; one way or the other he must break the stalemate. And yet, he wouldn't retire in favor of that Lette . . .

HOURS later, the shock of another stretch of weather plus the blast of the siren . . . Thurber Hanley had come to a decision; this farce of command would not continue. He absolutely refused to go through the joltings of foul weather again, refused to step ashore a quitter for mankind to slur; he couldn't seem to regain his old iron grip on command. Well, he didn't have to do any of these stern things. There was a simple way out of the dilemma, a sure way. Aye, that route he'd take.

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Actually he chuckled, now the decision was made. His overtaxed brain, akin to a fiddle, snapped its strings and eased. His emotions cooled, then froze. At last, a foretaste of peace.

A certain craftiness grew upon the new Thurber Hanley. He appeared unexpectedly on the bridge, took a grim delight in the surprise he'd caused, and stayed there. What cared he, now, for fog or snow? Absolutely nothing could possibly alter his future. Of course, there was the random thought that he might go on this way, having astonished his men. But that couldn't last and he knew it; he would go straight through with his purpose.

Late in the night, he left the bridge with purposeful tread.

THE *Daniel Boone* had one peculiarity in design that singled her out at sea. It was a short stretch of open guardrail aft on her main deck, an outside spot to which mere landsmen would never give a thought.

And yet, on this particular night, while other travellers slept, one man in tweeds had sought out this spot. He stood alone against the rail, a solitary, sleepless gentleman. His gray cap hung low over his eyes, his upturned collar concealed a broad, blocky chin. His eyes stared at the water racing past the ship's side.

At length he stirred. "Well," he murmured, "here goes!" And he certainly knew just how he'd go. Not in a clumsy climb atop the rail; he'd lurch himself up waist-high, then put everything into one huge somersault to eternity. Simply up—head low—heave! Then inhale before the propeller got to him.

Up went the figure against the rail. The head lowered, it shot overside, the feet whipped high——

A gaunt human streak of speed leaped from the shadows close by. It leaped again, reached high, seized those flying legs and whipped them down viciously.

"You dam' fool! In a jiffy you'd 'ave pitched overboard. What the hell?" He waited for some explanation.

He got none yet. Ponderously the big fellow put his feet under himself. Grimly he rose to confront the ghostly form wheezing from exertion. "That's exactly what I propose to do," he snarled.

"You—you mean to say you were jumping overboard? You?"

No answer.

"Cripes. So *you* had the nerve! Mister, I been out here four bells tryin' to h'ist over that rail. God, I—I can't. Maybe t'gether we could get away—with it." His speech thickened. He swayed loosely and sank to the deck.

It was the sheer rattle of his bones that moved the man in tweeds. He bent close over the fellow; aye, he had fainted.

Nothing could hinder the somersault now. The kneeling man contemplated the guardrail anew, but his eyes came back to the wraith beneath him. Years of responsibility for others' lives, five generations of that responsibility behind it, turned his immediate attention away from his own concerns to the plight of this unconscious stranger. How could he leave this apparition lying here? Impossible.

EXPERIENCE told him the fellow was a stowaway whom semi-starvation had weakened; that, he concluded, accounted for the lack of nerve and the desire to end it. Swift exertion had drained his meager vitality.

The *Boone's* siren gave out one final blast as she cut out of fog into the clear

night. That blast seemed to vibrate throughout the prone figure. It stirred uneasily. With a shudder it resumed consciousness. It struggled to sit up.

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A hand checked it, however. "Lie still, you're too weak. I'll be back right away with something hot. Mind, now, stay put."

He stayed. The next sound that stirred him was the rasp of tweeded legs. He sniffed the fumes of broth—and was grateful it wasn't hard liquor.

A dozen things about him convinced his benefactor that he was no landsman. He had stood up like a seaman, he had said "four bells". Added to these were the unmistakable traits of a sociable emotional being. One simply had to like him, had to do something for him. In fact, he was asking things already; his hand indicated a place beside him. "Ease down here, will you? I been thinking. Gotta talk." While the other crouched closer, he continued, "Tell me, what is it about the stock market that gets you fellers?"

"Market gets—oh!" exclaimed his hearer. His leonine head shook in negation. "You are mistaken, sir; I had nothing to do with the recent fiasco downtown. Huh, I—I——" his words became solemn mutterings.

"Then what the hell? You got plenty, look at yer clothes, yer size. You're a good eater 'nd dresser, what in hell're you jumping rails for? I gotta know, man!"

A trying little silence, followed by a hoarse, bronchial rumble that said, "Clothes and food aren't enough—oh, life simply isn't worth the candle. That's all."

"Queer," the stowaway commented sharply. "Should think a guy with nerve enough to take the jump oughta have enough to battle down anything else—when he's eatin' and dressin' like you are."

The larger man stirred uneasily.

"Now me," the monologue resumed, "I ain't got the guts to die, even. When I found out whose ship I'd stowed on it made me so damned mad I knew I could go over—but I—I can't quite take the plunge, damn it! God, it's awful."

Curiosity began to percolate in the brain that weighed all this. "What do you care whose ship you're on? This is one of the Great American Line boats."

THE bony fists clenched. "You're tellin' me. Huh. Whose boat, though? Never mind, I know him, the manslaughterer. This ship 's his wreckin' outfit. Imagine goin' off shore, outa yer way——" The tirade waxed hot, it should have stung the big fellow's senses, but he was puzzled, trying desperately to remember. Who had he stumbled onto out here in the night, some discharged petty officer? He asked cautiously, "What have you against this vessel's skipper?"

"I just been tellin' yer, he run me down, in a blizzard. We was hove to in a helluva mess callin' for help. And he got away with it. Oh yes, the great Cap'n Hanley of a big liner! But I ain't had a job since. He busted me."

"Busted——?"

"That's what I said, I was master o' that freighter he sent down with six good men. Not slathered all over with gold braid, but I had me a ship." The sarcasm was rancid.

A shudder shook the heavy form at his side. He couldn't believe his ears, and yet—"What ship was it?" he asked softly.

"The *Black Crown*. We had steers outa Halifax for Portland, to a British liner that 'd been re-routed to avoid ice. Came on a snowstorm and that old tub, she quit on us. So we had to risk salvage claims and send for help. This big brute's wireless took our call and came tearing. He ran us down, split us in two. Can you imagine comin' like that in thick weather? Why, they could 'ave sheered off in time, even after they spotted us, but no, sir; they rammed right into us. Mess? You just can't imagine the bawlin' of those steers!"

Couldn't imagine? As though his haunted ears had heard anything else these interminable eight months! And the death cries of men, and frothing seas in driven snow. He couldn't imagine, he!

So fate had hauled him back from the

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rail just to deal him this final blow. He surveyed the wreck lying beside him; in the drawn, flushed face he saw the ghostly whiteness of a ruined captain. It struck deep into his soul.

". . . so I sunk down to bein' just a bum. No ship, not even a third mate's job. And I found out that nobody wants a master's ticket in the fo'castle, either. Imagine that one!"

The man sitting rigidly so as to conceal his face didn't imagine anything, at present; he was trying to rate the possibilities in this broken executive of the sea.

BUT he had to show some interest eventually, so he said, "As I recall the case, this Cap'n Hanley was exonerated of blame, wasn't he? Didn't he come onto you from downwind? A thick snow squall hid you at the time and——"

Up came the ruined captain on one elbow. "Oh-ho. You know all about it."

"I—why, yes. It was—er, in the papers. And maybe this Hanley didn't take it so lightly as you say, ever think of that?"

"Him? Say, mister, he's got a perfect job; he's sittin' cozy up there in his plush cabin. He's lookin' out for number one. Why, if you went up there and said, 'Bill Bannion!' to him it wouldn't register. What'd he remember about a busted freighter skipper he's busted? That man's sure of his job—and hisself."

Sure of himself, was he, when only an hour ago his sole hope of peace lay in suicide! But the hour down here had shown him one small way to compensate in part for his huge blunder in that snowstorm; it had come along with his ingrained sense of responsibility. He owed this man a great debt, a debt that loomed larger than Joe Lette, his own fears or anything else. Already he was planning for Bill Bannion's future.

The tirade had exhausted Bannion, his tongue came to rest. The man at his side rose stiffly, he maintained carefully the air of a passenger to say, "I must go inside now. I'll send out a steward—I'm acquainted with some of those fellows, I make this trip frequently. He'll have a room for you and a place at a table somewhere. But keep out of sight and go ashore in Halifax. Better try for a place on some coastwise boat of American registry, don't you think?"

The fellow scorned the suggestion, what hadn't he tried—in vain? "Oh I'll go ashore," he acceded, "might be some boat come in there short-handed. Of course there won't, but I get your drift." He was wavering between hope and hopelessness in a way that stung the other man.

"Well," the latter confided, "I happen to have a bit of influence in certain shipping circles, mister."

Before that revelation could start anything, he departed.

Half an hour later, with more food under his belt, and a contented grin across his pale face, Bannion stretched onto a real bed. He dropped to sleep instantly.

High up in the *Boone* in another room, Captain Thurber Hanley got out of his tweeds, into his gold-bound regalia. He went onto the starlit bridge without considering the prospect of meeting Joe Lette or anybody else. His brain was mulling plans for another man.

THE red ink predominated in the ledgers of the Upton Cargoes Company. The Boston main office, the Portland Branch, the foreign Halifax agency—all deep in the red. So Upton ships pared costs; they kept away from drydocks. They'd continue to do so until business picked up. But they kept going, perforce, hold desperately what business they had.

So their mates spliced worn gear and their engineers tinkered out every hour of the turn arounds in port. Aboard the *Potomka,* for instance, Captain Welles had made the best of his worst winter. He had come into Halifax bulged in ice and gone out again breaking ice; he had hove to repeatedly for repairs between Halifax and Portland. He had begged for new lines, paint, engine parts with the success

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of an Esquimo truck gardener. The morning came when Welles footed her through his last ice and went ashore. Exit Welles.

That morning the seed Thurber Hanley had sown sprouted for Bill Bannion. Captain Bill knew that "the tourist in tweeds," as he remembered him, had somehow let drop the kindly word. He also appreciated it, but the feel of a bridge, of his own command under his feet, absorbed his entire thought. He was too busy to consider the means of his getting here. He looked the *Potemka* up and down, fore and aft. He discovered a thousand evidences of skimpy upkeep; worn hawsers on stern and fo'castle head, miserable rusty blotches all along both sides of her, boot-topping clear up to the waterline and leaking steam that clouded winches and fogged the engine room vault. No, this *Potemka* was not in the pink, but she was another coastwise command for Billy Bannion and he hugged her to his heart. Yeah, he'd just have to get acquainted around the Halifax office to find the address of "the tourist in tweeds," sure had to write that guy a thankyou letter.

To-day, however, he went to sea. He kept on going to sea in the *Potemka,* with less and less thought about the letter he'd been going to write. It took considerable attention to run this boat.

MEANWHILE something strange had happened aboard the *Boone.* Captain Thurber Hanley had changed. He astonished his watch officers—and dismayed Joseph Lette. Ever since that night going east when he'd vanished for hours, to reappear like the skipper of some eight months back, Joe Lette had been baffled. He had done some grim, selfish hoping during Hanley's absence that night, but now he felt about as useful as the after funnel—only a dummy. Time and again he'd play up his psychology to redominate the man who had feared thick weather. Each attempt reached only to the point when a peculiar gleam showed in the Old Man's eyes, then that commanding bass voice would boom, "You're due for forty winks, mister. Go below till we need you."

Joe Lette soon read a double meaning in these recurring shafts of barbed praise, but what had come over the skipper lately? "Why, hell, I had that decorated elephant eatin' outa my hand!"

Thurber Hanley's mind spent its odd moments on something more decent; it was Bill Bannion's future. He had made certain inquiries that told him Bannion now had an Upton ship; what ship, Hanley didn't learn. But he had, in a measure, cleared himself of that *Black Crown* curse; he felt pretty good about it.

All the same, Thurber Hanley wanted no more memories of that awful event, so he endeavored to forget everything connected thereto. Yet, away back in the darker deeps of his mind lurked one sneaking, irrepressible doubt: how might he act in another emergency? Would he go to pieces? Would he let Lette cash in on it? Or had he completely regained his grip on himself and on command of the *Daniel Boone,* regardless of what might befall? As yet he could not be sure.

Nor did the ship solve his secret query. Oh she met occasional fogs, a very few storms, but no perilous going to prove Thurber Hanley.

ONE wintry night the *Boone* left Nantucket Lightship astern in the west and pushed on east in a rising sea. Captain Hanley peered at those whitecaps emerging from the blackness ahead, he knew they's be much whiter within the hour. His barometer was dancing downward. Underfoot he discerned the deep sea's unrest in the peculiar motion of his ship. A dirty night lay ahead; this time it would be indeed dirty, too. A dirty day would follow; maybe another night on the end of it.

He pictured legions of those ravaging seas that sound out their coming from miles ahead, pictured the *Boone* hoisting maelstroms into her forward well deck. She reeled to the incessant shocks, she was

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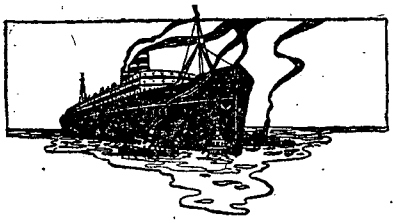
corkscrewing, she'd have to be hove to a-quartering!

Impatiently Thurber Hanley left her bridge. He paced the top deck because no other human would be out there to bother him. On past broad lifeboats, their patent davits looming like gargoyles on his left. The forward funnel sizzled a steam bouquet overhead on his right. Hotel sounds came up the outgo ventilators. All the familiar sounds came sharply to-night, but the impressions they made on his mind were secondary. The old doubt within him claimed his unwilling attention to-night, would he go through this storm as he should? A monster of doubt loomed in his soul, reared its unwelcome head like the gargoyle davits. Thick, blinding snow



was coming, hadn't the radio warned? "Blizzard—major intensity—center off Newfoundland."

Back and forth he paced. What would Thurber Hanley do with Captain Thurber Hanley this time the devil rode the fo'castle head? "Good Lord, I've *got* to—how much time 've I left to get myself set for it?" he muttered.

Maybe the wireless had another report that would tell that; he left his beat to cross the ship. He rounded the after corner of the house abaft the dummy funnel, swung forward and came to the wireless room. He braced himself for storm news and opened the door as though it were hung on the hinges of fate.

And indeed it was. One good look inside that warm room gave him something brand new to contemplate. The atmosphere was tense, the very light from the bulbs over the table was charged with—with what?

He had opened the door unnoticed, now he eased himself inside. His eyes centered upon a yellow pad of paper. It lay between the unimaginative chief and his voluble assistant, in the glare on that long table. Both were eyeing it, taking in every word the assistant was writing on it as dots and dashes came off the air into his earphones. Something had happened somewhere, these two were getting big news!

Thurber Hanley stole closer behind them. At a safe distance to avoid notice, he, too, peered at the words and read: "KMGR to agent, Halifax. Hove to on sea anchor. Position 67W 43-20N. Have broken valve stem at l.p. cylinder. Send out another one per measurements on your blueprints. Shall install it here and go on."

Hanley's eyes deciphered the next message, just below that one. It ran: "*Potellis* about ninety miles SW your position. Ordered to come to your assistance."

To which KMGR had retorted: "We want that valve stem, not the *Potellis*. Hurry valve stem out of Halifax to us. Heavy sea. Getting heavier. Port list. Icing up fast."

"*Potellis* ordered to tow you in."

"I refuse tow. Fetch us that valve stem. Blizzard."

"*Potellis* coming forced draft to take you off. Abandon."

THURBER HANLEY forgot he hadn't intended to reveal his presence while this was on. A score of suspicions leaped to mind. In an impulse he boomed, "What's all this? Who is KMGR?"

Both operators wheeled around. Jake peeled one ear while the chief reached for his ships' register.

Jake shouted, "This is a battle, sir, between a cap'n in a tight jam at sea and an agent in an easy chair ashore. And how!"

"Obviously," Thurber Hanley grunted, "but who——?"

"KMGR is the *Potemka*," the chief operator read solemnly aloud. "She's one o'

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those Upton boats outa Halifax, by the looks."

More suspicions filled Hanley's disturbed mind. His memory stirred him to ask, "Got the cap'n's name yet, master of that KMGR?"

"Oh sure," cried the excited Jake, "he's W. Bannion. I got that long—*Listen!*"

The room became supercharged again. Whines filled the ear phones. Fiercely they came and fast. Then they ceased abruptly.

"For the—holy guptill, grace dee-vine!" shouted Jake. "That guy's got nerve. He refuses everything. Says the *Potellis* can take off his crew, but not him. 'I refuse to leave my ship,' he says. Now what the devil ails that cap'n?"

"Probably gone haywire," the chief operator droned.

Something rang a warcry in Thurber Hanley's brain. He wheeled sharply toward the door, shoved it open stepped over the coaming. But he about-faced to declare, in parting, "He's the sanest man in the world. His life depends on getting his engine going."

The door slammed.

It reopened immediately on two gaping young men. Captain Hanley's head shot in. "Radio Cap'n Bannion the *Boone* is coming to repair his valve stem."

CAPTAIN Hanley took over completely. He sent watch officers scurrying into the chart room to lay a course for the *Potemka's* position—"and allow plenty to leeward for drift, she's on a sea anchor," he warned briskly.

Joe Lette came insinuatingly, only to be sent immediately to check hawsepipes, battens and lifeboats. While he descended the weather stairway, up the other flight ran a deck messenger with a wireless for the captain.

"Out with it," the skipper demanded. "What's it say?"

"It says, 'Risk another collision from you? Never. I'd go down in this boat before accept a favor from T. Hanley.' It's signed, 'W. Bannion,' sir."

Thurber Hanley thought a few moments out in silence. So this was his first word from the man he had secured a place at sea when nothing else could have returned him to command! Go down before he'd accept, eh? Then it dawned upon the Old Man; Bannion didn't know, of course, that he, Hanley, was the man he had met up with on the lower afterdeck that dark night. Even so, he wondered now what difference it would make. He turned to the messenger who did not go back to report. "Anything more?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Chief operator says tell you Cap'n Bannion has radioed the *Po*—the *Potellis* to come on."

"Very well," Thurber Hanley shouted into the wind rising ominously around him. To himself, however, he vowed, "But I shall save that fellow in spite of himself. We shall beat the *Potellis* to him!"

Out came the senior watch officer. He shouted his computed course to the *Potemka*. The *Boone* heeled over on a hard helm. Torn seas sprang up her weather side.

It was a fight from the outset. She steadied into the teeth of the coming storm.

And Captain Hanley found himself doing, for the second time in his career, a bold thing that had once resulted in disaster; he was plowing into a blizzard to the second rescue of Bill Bannion. Details of that other venture rose before his eyes in cinematic detail, bawling cattle, steel crunching steel, men yelling—damn it, think of anything but that! To his dismay a blot of sweat trickled down his face.

"Where the hell 're we headin' now?" Joe Lette's voice snarled it in his ear, Joe Lette who had been roused by the change in the ship's motion. Here he stood, his rivet eyes detecting the gleam of sweat on the Old Man's face by the wan light of the binnacle close by. "If it's the storm you're runnin' away from," he sneered,

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"you're wrong. Head round the other way."

"There's a ship up ahead, mister; he's in a jam. We're on our way to her."

LETTE grunted his brazen scorn and waited for more explanation. How many, many times he had waited like this to sweat further comments out of the Old Man—but this time no more words came. That old trick failed this time, so Joe Lette wheeled around the binnacle. He flung himself off the bridge and hurried pell-mell for the wireless room.

Meanwhile, speed! It sang throughout the *Boone*. Crockery smashed in pantries, slice bars clanged below, and fire doors banged open and shut.

Obsidian mountains heaped above the *Boone's* bows. They loomed in walls to descend in crushing tons; but her sleek cutwater parted them like a divining rod and sped through. Twenty-two, twenty-three knots—the *Daniel Boone* was wide open!

In Captain Hanley's mind another storm raged. He fought down those frightened cattle, that scene in blinding snow, fought to concentrate every ounce of his strength upon the present race into the north.

God knows he needed to, for Lette became a devil to-night. He burst out of the wheelhouse with eyes agleam. His head hunched for trouble, his teeth were bared in a wolfish snarl. This time Joe Lette meant business.

"You're mad!" he shouted, disregarding the others on the bridge. "Risking this ship, thousands of lives aboard here, racing to a dirty old freighter that won't take your offer of help when you get there."

The Old Man never so much as turned his head.

"That cap'n, he knows you. Huh! He knows he's signing his own death articles to have you coming anywhere near him in that snowstorm. He ain't forgot." Lette thrust his evil face closer to penetrate that silent soul with, "You ain't forgot, either; those bawlin' cattle, those men that nobody could save. The *Black Crown* was cut clean in two, mister. By you!"

THE senior watch officer rose to the tips of his toes on that brazen taunt. The helmsman's ears burned. The junior officer turned his back to muffle an exclamation. But the Old Man fooled them all. He turned upon his vicious tormentor with a voice as calm as a vacant stateroom:

"Lette, the man up there in trouble is Captain William Bannion. He was master of the *Black Crown* when she went down."

His composure, his bald statement, numbed Lette. What could he say now? But Lette was resourceful beyond measure; in the stark stillness his harsh voice burst forth in a wild laugh that was sheer derision. Lette had indeed waxed bold to-night.

"So-o!" he chortled. "A big publicity stunt, this is. Cap'n of liner atones for former blunder, saves former victim against his will—you damned fool! That *Potemka's* owners have already ordered her abandoned; I've read their orders in the wireless room myself just now. Probably glad to lift the insurance on her old hulk. And you think you'll rescue her crew, eh? Why, her sister ship is on her way a'ready to take 'em off, she's nearer there than we are. Next we know you'll ram her, she's on this course as like as not." Lette's fury let go when this failed to draw a word from the Old Man. "By God, you ain't goin' up there!"

At this point Joe Lette wheeled upon the other men on the bridge. "I call you all to witness, this man's gone mad. You know how he's ducked thick weather for months, ever since he sank the *Black Crown*. You've seen him dodge fogs and storms, now he's riskin' ship, crew and passengers for a shot of glory. He's mad. I'm sendin' a wireless to the New York office for authority for me to take over this command. Stand by for orders."

Joe Lette never sent that wireless. Captain Thurber Hanley pivoted and

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swung. There were five generations of Captains Hanley in that swing, five sailing masters who had stood off mutinies on their quarterdecks and lashed the halyards in the rigging to defy wind and disaster—and the sea lawyers who would have taken over in crises.

Lette, the bold, the would-be commander, lay his length beside the binnacle with a welt rising on his jaw. The Old Man of the *Boone* turned deliberately from Lette's relaxed figure to the junior officer. "Get you some sailors, mister, and lock up this man; he's lost his bearings."

A RELIEVED laugh went round, they'd hear no more of Joe Lette's stories of his own cleverness aboard here.

But none of them realized how much that scene had taken out of Thurber Hanley. He realized the danger in what he was doing; aye, and he could still turn back, the *Potellis* would take care of her sister ship—somehow, eventually. Out

ahead a storm was coming, two dangers of collision—and safety lay in resuming the *Boone's* course to Cobh.

But Thurber Hanley's mind cleared abruptly, as though a white hot flame had removed the dross in one blast. Immediately he beheld something far greater than safety at stake; his own self-confidence and Bannion's future. Billy Bannion who had stood by the *Boone's* rail a few months ago without the nerve to jump. If Bannion lost out this time, if his ship had to be abandoned, he'd be all done with the sea—and with life. No, a man in that fix could not come back a second time, he'd pass for a jonah. He'd die.

Snow! The storm was upon the *Boone*. So soon? Captain Hanley brushed it off his face. If only he could have reached the *Potemka* before this, or got past that lumbering *Potellis* while she could be seen.

There was no dawn, it merely turned less dark. Something dingy hoisted over a huge sea to leeward. It sank out of sight, swayed and reeled up again. The *Potemka* away down here? No, it was under way.

"There she is, sir!" shouted a watch officer. It was the *Potellis* bucking the weather at a snail's pace. What chance had she to get there in time?

But he went astern of the *Boone* in a smother and Captain Hanley sighed his relief; at least one danger was past. The *Boone* tore on into the gray and green of a stormswept morning.

At the captain's beck, his chief wireless operator came onto the bridge.

"What news from the *Potemka*—KMGR?"

"Nothing, sir," the operator replied soberly.

"What!"

"Her radio died an hour ago."

THE *Boone* had arrived, she had run out her time and log. All around her, slanting snow and wind-torn seas; but no *Potemka*.

Lookouts were doubled aloft, every license except Lette mounted the reeling bridge. The engines turned at Slow Ahead, the ship beat on a zigzag course upwind in search of a black freighter adrift on the end of a drogue, a sea anchor.

The wheelhouse clock sang two bells like a death knell deep down in the soul of Thurber Hanley, two bells here without sighting so much as the trace of wreckage. Had ship, crew and Bannion gone down when their radio had ceased calling? Hanley was forced to consider that heartbreaking question: How much longer shall I search?

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Suddenly came a chorus of yells—and Jake running up to the bridge.

". . . two points on the starb'd bow, sir!"

"She's calling the *Potellis* on her emergency battery set, sir!"

Within ten minutes the *Boone* stood northeast of a sea anchor, the *Potemka* lurched and wallowed beyond it.

Then began a spicy exchange of radio messages that made front page news all the way from Canada to the Gulf. It still is tradition in certain marine circles. "Said the cap'n of the liner to the cap'n of the freighter—" Old timers have made it legend, and with reason.

For Bill Bannion showed his dander from the very outset. To think he'd see that same demolishing *Boone* hanging upwind of him again, as though poised to pounce upon this *Potemka* as she'd pounced on the *Black Crown!* Bill spurned Hanley's repeated, insistent offers to repair the valve stem in his liner's repair shop, Bill cursed the arguments coming in on his radio from the *Boone's* master, "the guy that rammed me once already."

Meanwhile the *Potellis,* somewhere out of sight in the south, got in her calls betweentimes. How much longer could the *Potemka* stay afloat? Why didn't she reply? Had the *Boone* got there? And, Want us to take off your crew? Reply. Reply!

All at once the other went silent. Not a word—until one terse burst of code left the *Potemka;* Bill Bannion was dictating his own epitaph.

"*Potemka* calling *Potellis,*" it ran. "Take off my crew. I shall stay aboard." Obviously for the *Boone's* benefit he added: "Shall never be guilty of taking favors from Hanley of the *Boone.*"

That one struck home; it corked the bottle for Thurber Hanley. It burned his ears when the messenger read it aloud to him, for he knew that all the others on the bridge had listened to the bitter taunting indictment. It stung.

The Old Man's chin settled deep into his collar. He paced from wing to wing, and every officer there knew he was taking defeat hard. This would turn the tables Joe Lette's way.

THEY were wrong. Lette? The Old Man wasn't aware of Lette. As for defeat, well—— "Risked my ship, lives, demotion for leaving the course and losing time," Thurber Hanley murmured into his collar. "Now he not only refuses my help but broadcasts his spleen to the world. All right, I can leave him, I can——" but Thurber Hanley glanced toward that battered freighter, her deadly burden of ice, her sickening struggle up steep seas. No, Bannion little realized it, but neither he nor his men would be here when the lumbering *Potellis* arrived; she'd been making a bare five knots when the *Boone* had passed her. She'd arrive to late.

And the Bannion he had re-established in a ship would perish in that same ship. What good could it possibly do him? The owners might collect insurance, but Billy Bannion—— A clever shaft of inspiration broke into his gloom; he hurried to the radio. So Bannion had said he'd never be guilty of favors, eh? Well, this might snap him out of it—it might.

Sparks, senior, couldn't believe his own ears. Send that? Was it a fact? He repeated the message unbelievingly.

"Right. Send it. Hurry," the Old Man snapped.

The finger on the key tapped out to the freighter's half crazed master, "You already have accepted favors from me. From my hands you accepted a bowl of hot broth one night on my ship's main deck aft."

Sparks marvelled at his skipper during the wait that followed. His face drew tense, his jaws ground noisily, his mouth made voiceless words. Would Billy understand? Would he grasp the import of this reminder? Sparks knew a lot about mankind, a liner's chief op can't help that, but he never suspected what he was actu-

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ally seeing. For Thurber Hanley's silent words were reaching far above the aerial, above the storm; they were directed to Deity——"Make him accept my offer to weld that stem, make him see it's both our careers, our lives, at stake again. We'll both have to jump the rail unless he lets me repair that bit of steel!"

Thurber Hanley hung over the radio until he felt the op's eyes boring him. He moved to the open door to hide his worst fears and saw a faint blur fade in the storm; his first watch officer was working the *Boone* away from the freighter. Maybe it was just as well, no reply had come, might as well go on.

Then it came, it came in a blast of whines that shocked the Old Man. Dot, dash, dash—

"Cap'n!" Sparks shouted it. "He says, 'My boats badly iced but shall steam one free to send you valve stem astern of us. Sorry. Thanks.'"

THURBER HANLEY was elated, but a grim realization had come upon him. Slowly he left the room. Deliberately he mounted the bridge and gave commands for the maneuvering of the *Boone*. Then he sent for the bosun. A few low-voiced orders in his ear and they parted. In his cabin, Thurber Hanley shook into a weathered old outfit that long had been his sole reminder of the days when his main deck had stood almost flush with the sea.

Few, if any, recognized the man who appeared at lifeboat eight a few minutes later. The bosun got his nod and waved a volunteer crew into the boat. The big fellow in weathered reefer took the stern seat. Patent davits leaned away, took along the boat and she went down. With surprising speed she was clear and away on tremendous, hissing seas. Now she vanished, now shot toward the very sky in a squall. She was lost to view and the bosun groaned at the liner's rail.

Minutes stretched to eons until she reappeared on another crest—directly over the freighter's sea anchor! In an instant she was doomed to crash to lapboards on that—no, that reefered figure in her stern sprang up, hove his helm over. She poised, reeled, then down she sped. Only a few feet from the flotam and hawser, but clear.

Up she came again like a bullet, this time to loom almost over the ice-caked hamper on the *Potemka*. "If that bunch ever clears that without smashing aboard——" growled the bosun on the *Boone's* boat deck. But the battling master in the stern must have cracked out a swift order; the port oars hauled her round, the bosun could see them fighting, see the man in the stern battling for life—and the boat came clear, to speed on for a lee.

Aye, battling. Thurber Hanley had known what was in store, he had come into this life-and-death-test for one purpose that none save he knew about. On his slow way out of that radio room he had faced a grim truth: If I can get close to that running sea once again in an open boat and fetch Bannion's broken valve stem here myself without muffing the job, there's no weather possible that'll ever jar Thurber Hanley again!

So the boat rounded deftly into a temporary lee, close to the *Potemka's* rusty hull. Oars fended her off, and Thurber Hanley's own hands closed on the valve stem just as the *Boone* got nicely down to leeward to receive her wandering chick.

LATE in the wintry day came a cheery "Okay!" from the *Potemka*, just as the old *Potellis* slogged into view. The *Potemka* resumed her way into the southwest; her sister ship went on north.

The *Daniel Boone* churned at last into the storm-tossed east for Cobh, and on her bridge stood Captain Thurber Hanley. His eyes were steadfast and clear and he faced into the storm without fear.

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A Taxicab Had Knocked Him Down on Fifth Avenue; He Came To Somewhere in Central America—With a Fight on His Hands, Too

I

THE young man with the bandaged head stirred on the hospital cot. He opened his pain-blurred eyes and closed them again, quickly, as the bright shafts of light struck down at him. The nurse rose from her chair beside the bed. She adjusted the angle of the Venetian blinds. Then, returning, she touched his wrist with expert fingers, noting the renewed strength of his pulse beats.

"*Cómo está usted,* Señor Blake?" she asked, her smile a white flash across olive skin.

It took the young man some moments to speak at all. He frowned and looked around the dim, high-ceilinged room. He listened to the unfamiliar sounds which

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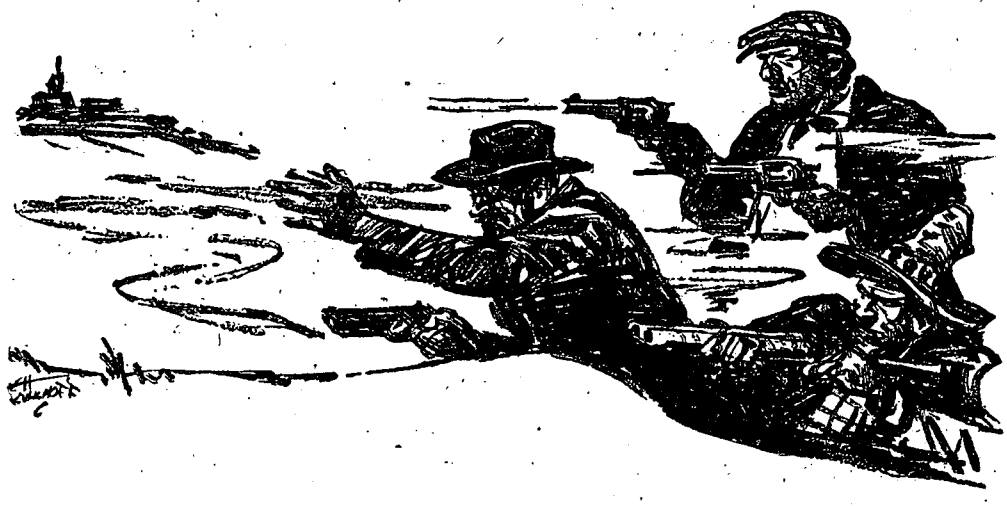
THE JAGUAR'S CUB

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "Wings in the Silence," "Brothers," etc.

came through the interstices of the slatted blinds. Instead of the familiar rumble of elevated trains and the humming purr of motor cars on smooth concrete and the indistinct vibration of the subway, he heard city noises of an entirely different kind. The honking of cars was the shrillest, most constant, he had ever known, and the street

pain in his head; having saved, dollar by dollar, twenty-one dollars for that suit, to have it ruined the second day he had worn it to business! That much he could remember plainly. A faint image remained in his mind of starting to stagger toward the curb—but that was all. And now he was in a hospital.



cries were in a strange sing-song the like of which he had never before heard in New York.

"What," he asked the nurse slowly, "did you say?"

"I ask you," she replied in English heavily underlaid with some foreign accent, "'ow you feel?"

Now, slowly, things were coming back. He remembered the taxicab which had charged down upon him as he crossed Fifth Avenue at Forty-Third Street. He remembered attempting to dodge—too late. But there was something more. He remembered picking himself up, brushing the dirt from his new blue serge suit and noticing, aghast, that there was a ragged tear in the sleeve. Distinctly he recalled that awful feeling that had penetrated the

. He swung his feet off the cot. He sat up, fighting down knife-stabs of vertigo that swirled through his brain. The nurse, alarmed, placed her hand on his shoulder.

"You mus' not get up, Señor Blake!" she protested.

HIS name was not Señor Blake. It was Baker, William Henry Baker, but it was not worth while explaining. It would take too long to explain and his head ached. Besides, he must get down to the office. An accident might be an accident to William Henry Baker, but to J. Allison Halliday, Advertising, it was an inexcusable flaw in the smooth and faultless functioning of an otherwise perfect organization. And there was the Glotz Baby

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Food copy to write before morning. If that full-page ad were not on Mr. Halliday's desk by 9.15 A. M., one William Baker would no longer be able to term himself a promising young account executive or, in fact, anything at all on the Halliday payroll.

"Go away," said William, churlishly pushing the nurse's hand from his shoulder. "I'm getting out of here right now."

"But ze—the doctor weel not pairmit eet," the nurse said.

Ordinarily William Baker was a young man who took authority very seriously. Even the crossing of Fifth Avenue with the traffic lights against him was a breach in the ordinary discipline of his ordered life—he had jaywalked only to save himself from being late to work. But now, with his blurry mind still focussed upon his imperilled job, he glared angrily at the comely nurse.

"The doctor can take a long running jump into the lake," he snapped. "Gimme my clothes."

Helplessly the young woman motioned toward a closet in one corner of the room. then, as William Baker tottered toward the closet door, she vanished swiftly in search of assistance.

There was a disappointment in store for William Baker as he opened the door. Instead of the neat, double-breasted suit of blue serge, an unfamiliar white linen coat hung upon the hook. He looked for the blue serge, but it was not there. Even worse; looped over another hook was a strange leather apparatus from which the ugly-looking handle of a big automatic protruded malevolently.

"Hey, nurse!" William called, but there was no answer.

HELPLESSLY the young man turned back into the room. He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror and stared in shocked amazement at the change the accident had made in his appearance. Of course the heavy bandage which covered his blazing thatch of crimson hair may have had something to do with it, but there were new lines running down from his prominent nose to the corner of his mouth, new wrinkles—a whole network of them—gathered around the corners of his blue eyes. He looked older and somehow—he searched for the word—well, harder. Even his mouth, which had been pleasant, rather than strong, had thinned oddly, giving it a new expression that was almost grim. He was still staring at himself, puzzled and preoccupied, when the nurse reentered the room. Behind her was a physician, obviously the resident doctor.

"What is all this, Señor Blake?" he said in English which bore a strong Spanish accent. "You should remain here——"

"My name," William said wearily, "isn't Blake. It's Baker. I'm getting out of here, right now, and I want my clothes. Those aren't my clothes in that closet."

The doctor flushed. "They are," he said, tartly, "the clothes you came in. And those who brought you registered you as Blake; also you are not unknown, remember, in Puerto Lucia."

"In where?"

"In Puerto Lucia," said the doctor, now watching him narrowly.

William turned suddenly and marched to the window. Instead of the familiar streets of New York, he looked down upon a wide, dusty plaza, fringed by dispirited palms and decorated with an abominable cast-iron statue of a horseman. Beyond were buildings and wide vistas of roof tops reminding him of highly-colored postcards which, years and years ago, had been sent back from strange, foreign countries by his father, who hadn't been much good and who had presently vanished from the ken of himself and his mother. William swayed giddily and steadied himself against the frame of the French windows. He had never been one to care for mysteries, and he did not care for this one. To have been injured in New York and to wake up in—what had the doctor said?—in Puerto Lucia, did not appeal to him. It was, to put it mildly, upsetting to a young

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man of William's careful, methodical temperament.

"What—how did I get here?" he faltered.

"Upon a stretcher," said the doctor. "You had been shot. Fortunately your skull appears to be very hard. The bullet merely furrowed your head, bouncing off the bone."

"Shot?" echoed William weakly. "But I mean, how did I get here from New York?"

The doctor advanced upon him. "You'd better get back into bed," he said soothingly.

A FEELING of sudden panic swept over William. Somebody was crazy, and he had a depressing idea that it was he. But if he were going to spend the rest of his life counting his thumbs and cutting out paper dolls, he was not going to do it here. He decided to say no more, but to get away instantly before someone called for the straight-jacket and a male nurse.

"I feel better, now," he said with a false grin. "Give me my clothes, please."

The doctor said something in Spanish. The nurse brought the white linen suit.

Also, William noted with same alarm, the leather strap to which was affixed the holster and the unpleasant-looking gun. She placed them before him and waited. He glanced down at his hospital nightgown and favored the nurse with a severe stare.

"Haven't you something to do somewhere else?" he asked meaningly.

Again the doctor spoke in his native tongue. The nurse looked astonished, but went away. William, crimson-cheeked, picked up his suit.

"Was I wearing this when I came in?" he demanded.

"Yes, Señor Blake."

"Baker," William corrected him. "How long have I been here?"

"About four hours."

William's head reeled. "Listen, doctor," he said, desperately, "the last thing I remember was walking across Fifth Avenue and——"

A strange light came into the physician's eyes, a suspicious light which warned William to say no more. The hunch was growing on him that if he were to keep on talking it would be a long time before he again saw Fifth Avenue and his desk at the Halliday office.

"Don't forget your gun," the doctor said, handing it to William. "You can go out the back way, but——"

"I don't want——" William began desperately.

Again that commendable spirit of caution asserted itself and he closed his lips tightly while the doctor slipped the loop beneath his left shoulder, adjusted the heavy holster beneath his armpit and pulled the buckle tight.

"As soon as you get to camp," he said, not too sympathetically, "go to bed and stay there twenty-four hours. I'll confess that this hospital won't be sorry to see you go. There is always a chance of trouble while you're here. You oil men have about as much respect for law and order as the North American gunmen you import and the native bandits you subsidize to do your dirty work for you. The country was better off before oil was discovered. Now wait and I'll get your wallet."

He went out of the room. William, clumsily buttoning his coat over the holster, was more confused than ever. Oil men? William knew none. Trouble. The doctor did not know the half of it. Wallet? He had no need for one. His

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thirty dollars a week was kept in his trousers pocket—while it lasted. He now remembered that when the taxi had struck him he had possessed exactly one dollar and thirty cents—with payday three days away. He had wanted to send some flowers to Frances, his fiancée, but had passed it up in favor of eating. And now he was not even in New York. There were palms outside the window and somebody was said to have shot him. Truly, the world had slipped into a spin!

THE doctor returned and proffered William a wallet. Doubtfully the broad-shouldered young man accepted it. His blue eyes expanded as he opened it. A thick wad of bills became visible. They were foreign money. There was a lot of it and the denominations were large. If it was real, there *was* a Santa Claus!

"Is this mine?" he demanded incredulously.

"You had it on you when you were brought in," the doctor said testily.

William dizzily passed the wallet to the doctor.

"My head rings like a bell," he said feebly. "Take out what I owe."

The other selected a single note. "I'll get the change," he said, without conviction.

"Never mind," William said. "I'll be going."

People looked at him as he and the doctor walked along the dim hall. Nurses stared at him and giggled. He noted that none of these people looked like Americans. The talk he heard was Spanish. He would have given the entire contents of his—or somebody's—wallet to have been able to ask the doctor all the questions that rushed into his mind, but he dared not risk it.

"*Hasta luego,*" the doctor said, opening a small door which led out into blinding sunlight. "Until next time, good-bye."

William, depressed by something in the doctor's pessimistic farewell, blinked uncertainly, trying to make up his mind what next to do. The vista before him was as strange as the innermost reaches of the Sahara. It seemed, somehow, a little foolish, to walk up to the nearest stranger and ask him how to get to New York.

"Hey, Bill!" called a friendly American voice from behind him. "Come on, let's get out of here. Sweet Susie, but you're a tough *hombre* to kill! I thought they had you!"

William looked around, uncertain that the man was addressing him. He had practically never been called Bill. Will, occasionally, but mostly William; he was not, somehow, the Bill type. He had wanted to be, but it had just never seemed appropriate. His shoulders were big enough, and at college the coach had asked him to go out for football, but he had been brought up to think that life was a pretty serious proposition and—well, his life had adjusted itself into pretty deep grooves.

The young man who had yelled, "Hey, Bill!" was looking at William. He was a friendly fellow of about twenty-four, which was exactly the age William had attained at the birthday three days before the taxicab had struck him on Fifth Avenue. There was a curious intentness, a quick, sharp focus to his gray eyes, but there was something about those eyes which reminded William of the new expression he had noted in his own when he had looked into the mirror. In spite of the suspicion with which William now regarded everything, he found himself liking the stranger at first sight.

"You seem to know me," he said cautiously, "but who are you?"

A LOOK of incredulity hardened the gray eyes which stared at him. But it died away in a smile. The young man scratched a chin that was both hard and lean, and grinned whitely.

"Come on, Bill," he said. "Let's be going while we still have our health."

Because he wished to get away from that hospital, and because he could not think of anything else to do at that moment, William suffered himself to be led toward

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a battered car which stood by the curb. There was little traffic on this street. It was obviously a back street; few pedestrians, even, were on the sidewalk.

And it was just as William was gazing about with bewildered curiosity that an astonishing, an unbelievable thing happened—happened so swiftly and was over so soon that later, thinking back, William could not sort out the details in his own mind.

Within his range of vision came just one familiar sight, a huge American car, low, black and fast. His companion swung quickly at the purring sound of that powerful motor. William saw the big car pick up speed, saw it swerve toward the sidewalk where he was standing.

"Down, Bill, quick!" the young man cried, harshly.

But William had had about enough. He saw no harm in a big American car coming close. Calmly he stood where he was. The young man spun toward him, his gray eyes narrowed and suddenly gone black. There was a gun in his hand, a big fistful of blued metal that looked infinitely dangerous. The man's hand flashed out, grabbed William's arm and jerked him forward so unexpectedly that William stumbled and fell to his hands and knees. His head almost crashed against the running board of the battered old car by the curb. He heard a gun explode close beside him as his companion, now crouching behind the dusty body of the car, fired shot after shot at the big automobile whose tires could be heard squealing on the pavement.

Then came the staccato rattle of a machine gun. The dingy car behind which the two knelt burst into thunderous clamor as bullets banged against its metal body. Something struck the sidewalk directly in front of William's face and sent a puff of sharp-edged particles of concrete into his skin. There was a strange little jerk at the shoulder of his coat. The air seemed filled with snapping sounds, and with clanging of slugs against sheet metal, and with gunfire. And in the background of all this chaotic diapason William could hear the harsh voice of his companion, cursing conversationally in an endless monotone. All this in the space of a dozen heartbeats.

And then the big black automobile had snarled past. The gray-eyed man leaped to his feet and emptied his gun at the departing gunmen.

"All right, Bill," he said, at last, feeding a new clip of bullets into his automatic. "Too bad they took your cannon away at the hospital. We'd have pipped 'em, sure."

FOR some obscure reason William, rising and shaking himself like a cat, decided not to inform the hard-boiled young man that a heavy gun was at the moment pressing uncomfortably against his chest. He had forgotten it in the excitement of the moment. But he felt free to admit to himself, at least, that had he remembered it he would have done nothing about it. He was no gunman, but an advertising man, lost in some miasmic dream that would presently be explained.

"Get in, *muy pronto*," the other said, incisively.

People were running toward them from a dozen directions. Two policemen, clad in faded khaki drill, appeared from around the corner, dragging at their holsters.

William, usually a very patient man, felt that things had gone far enough. In his experience, if you were in trouble, you consulted a policeman. Two policemen were arriving on the run. He intended to place the matter before them.

"I'm not getting in," he said, firmly. "I'm——"

Never had William been more completely mistaken than at that moment. No weakling, and weighing 180, shower-side, he felt two astonishingly strong hands slip between his armpits. His feet floated weightlessly from the ground and he thumped down hard on the front seat of the shabby car. His companion vaulted over his knees, slid under the steering

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wheel. The car, backfiring in protest, leaped ahead. Three shots slammed from somewhere behind. A fine spiderweb appeared on the windshield almost directly before William's amazed eyes.

"There could be," said the young man cheerfully, "safer places than this."

He yanked at the wheel. The tires clamored in a high-pitched screech. A narrow street swivelled around and presented itself before the skidding car. *Mozos,* swarthy and incurious, and naked, pot-bellied babies, scattered before the clattering juggernaut. Incredible squalor appeared and flowed noisomely past. A slaughter house took its stinks with it as it slid past the speeding car in a succession of paintless buildings and high fences. There came a segment of incredibly blue sea, with vessels, mostly oil-tankers, afloat upon a sheet of tinted glass. A range of purple mountains, their peaks supporting a canopy of cotton fluff, moved majestically across the roof tops and presented themselves directly before the car. The cheerful young man, his mouth smiling, but his eyes very hard, steered toward those mountains, following the streets, perforce, as they squirmed in and out of the odorous slums, but always heading back toward the distant mountains.

With some alarm, William noticed that the young man's gun lay ready across his lap. Then, for the first time in William's memory, something of violence stirred within him. He reached within his white linen coat, closed the fingers around the unfamiliar butt of his automatic and waited, grimly, for whatever might come next.

II

THE edge of the jungle, thick, green and malignant, stood poised just beyond the last native hut. The road dived into a swath cut through that leafy barrier, whose walls of living vegetation were so solid that the noise of the engine bounced back and forth, as from one side of a canyon to another. It was hot, and the air seemed filled with an invisible, scented steam. Straight ahead, over the roof of the jungle, were the great purple mountains which appeared to be supporting the cloudy arch of the sky.

William cast a yearning glance back toward the town of Puerto Lucia, but it had vanished as if the jungle had swept over it in the past few minutes and obliterated it in one monstrous tidal wave of living greenery. With every turn of the wheel, the cheerful young man was taking William farther and farther from the world he knew, and from the things and people who were a part of his normal life. William knew a sudden moment of sheer panic.

Still clutching the unfamiliar butt of his gun, he reached over with the other hand and twisted the switch key on the dashboard.

"Hey!" the young man protested. "What's the——?"

"Pull over to the side," William commanded with a firmness that surprised himself. "I've had enough of all this."

His companion stared at him, but permitted the car to roll to a stop.

"Listen," William said. "Who do you think I am?"

The other stared at him. "That's a goofy question, Bill. You're Bill Blake unless I've gone dizzy with the heat."

"What's your name?" William demanded.

Now his companion was definitely alarmed. "Clem Rooney," he said, and reached for the switch key.

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Firmly William pushed his hand away. "All right, Mr. Rooney, listen to me. The last thing I remember before waking up in that hospital back there was walking across Fifth Avenue, in New York, and being hit by a taxi. I don't know how I got here, or where I got this white linen suit, or anything else. I am an advertising man, and I've got to get back to my office just as soon as I can."

"Sure, sure," said Clem soothingly. Again he reached for the key. "Let's get going, Bill. There's a swell doctor I know, and——"

"I don't want a doctor," said William, again pushing Clem's hand from the key. "I want to know what all this funny business is about. How did I happen to get here to Puerto Lucia, and why did those people shoot at us, and where are we going, and how did you happen to be waiting for me, and——?"

"Listen, Bill," said Clem, his puzzled gray eyes very friendly. "The first time I saw you was two years ago. You——"

The world reeled in great, dizzy circles. Two years? William's brain rejected the idea. It was impossible.

"You walked in on us with a cannon hanging on each hip. You——"

"Walked in where?" William demanded incredulously.

"Into the drilling camp, don't you remember? You marched in, looked around and went up to the boss. You said that from now on you were on the payroll. You'd be responsible to see the paymaster wasn't robbed and that the drillers weren't bothered by the bandit-grafters. Well, that had been Jack Gurley's job, with me helping him. You polished Jack off and ran him out of camp. Then you heaved me into the wash-trough and it took the whole bunch of drillers to pry you loose. Remember?"

"No."

"And when the boss didn't want to hire you for chief guard, you pulled your guns and offered to chase the entire outfit into the jungle. The boss sort of took a shine to you. Said you were about the toughest hombre he ever saw and that you might be useful to have around."

"Me—tough?" William breathed.

"Plenty," said Clem, with manifest approval. "So we've sort of stuck around together ever since."

"I'm going right back to town and catch the next boat north," William said.

"Sure, sure," Clem agreed easily. "But first let's go to the camp and tell the boss we're going. Then maybe he can get us a couple of passes north on a company tanker."

"We?"

"Yeah, we. You don't think you're going to shake me, do you? Nerts, buddy. We've been through too much together to bust up now."

IT WAS all too confusing. The more this Clem Rooney talked, the more mixed-up everything was.

"All right," William agreed reluctantly. "Let's go. But I want to get back right away."

"Whatever you say, big boy," Clem agreed cheerfully. "If you know a better racket somewhere else, don't bother to tell me about it. Consider me in."

The car chugged ahead. William sat back in the seat, trying to make some sense out of it all. Two years out of his life, without even a memory to show for it? Impossible. Two years? Instead of being twenty-four, then, he was now twenty-six. And what about Frances Lovelace, to whom he had been engaged for years? Patient, level-headed Frances, who had wisely suggested that they wait another eighteen months so they might have saved enough money to furnish a three-room apartment in Flatbush! William's heart swelled in his throat and almost choked him.

The jungle swept past in two unbroken walls of foliage. It looked snaky, dangerous; William assured himself that he did not like it. Oddly, he found himself wondering whether his father had ever traveled this self-same road. For the first

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time for years he was conscious of a sudden feeling of kinship for the father he had never really known, for the restless adventurer he remembered dimly out of his childhood. A strange, silent man, whose English, William remembered, had a foreign lilt to it, and who would sing queer Spanish songs that sounded sad and somehow wistful. Rigorously William's mother had, after the father's last appearance at home, put him out of the household life. Even his picture—the one in the sombrero and the dragging gun-belts—was taken down from the wall. And William had learned, in the way children do, not to speak of his father any more. Now, suddenly, achingly, he wished that he had known his father, who might have gazed upon this very jungle, might have climbed that stupendous range of purple mountains ahead.

"'S'matter, big guy," Clem asked in a concerned voice, "head bothering you? Boy, it was sure lucky you ducked just when you did."

William took a long breath. "No," he said. "I was just wondering when I could get a boat back north."

Clem lapsed into silence. William watched the solid wall of the jungle swing past, endless, silent and formidable. He closed his eyes, wishing he were back in the remembered security of the office, where life held no problems more pressing than the saving of a little money every week, the holding of his job and the proper sales appeal of Glotz' Baby Food copy.

III

THE drilling camp was in a space hewn out of the living barrier of the jungle and kept clear only by the constant efforts of half a dozen axe-swinging *mozos*. Set just a little off the rutted highway, it was a collection of flimsy buildings, whose sides were of canvas, swung out to catch whatever faint breeze might have filtered through the forest. The tent-like buildings were set in the form of a large rectangle, making a sort of hollow square. Now, as Clem swung the motor car in from the road, the entire camp seemed to be deserted. Only a China boy could be seen carrying a tray of dishes from what was apparently the cook tent.

"The drilling crew is at work," Clem said, bringing the car to a shuddering stop. "Maybe the boss is in the office. And listen, Bill—" now his voice had become elaborately careless—"the company doctor is due today on his tour of the field camps. Maybe he's here now. Let's let him have a peek at your roof. Maybe some shingles are loose."

"My head's all right," William said peevishly. "What I want to find out is how soon I can get back to New York."

Clem sighed pessimistically. "I knew this racket of ours was too good to last. Swell pay, good grub and now and then a little schemozzle to give a guy exercise. And—and listen, Bill, what about Rosita?"

"Who," William asked nervously, "is Rosita?"

Clem's hard chiseled face showed flat disbelief.

"You wear a trail knee-deep through the jungle to her hacienda, and you talk in your sleep about her, and you offer to lick any six guys who kid you about her—and now you say, 'Who is Rosita?'"

"Well, who is she?" William's tone was that of a man whose fund of patience is quickly drawing to an end.

But Clem, glancing across the square enclosure made by the canvas-walled kitchen, dining room and bunk houses, twitched at William's sleeve.

"Here's Mr. Steel, Bill. Maybe we better not say too much about all this funny business, eh?"

A short, stocky man in a black felt hat, khaki shirt and trousers and field boots was strolling toward the car. Clem dismounted and walked over toward him. William searched his mind for some trace of memory, but to the best of his knowledge he had never seen Mr. Steel in his life. The man's face was baked an Indian-brown by the tropic sun. Against this

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dark background his hazel eyes looked extraordinarily bright and hard.

"What's the matter with your head, Blake?" he asked.

"Three guesses, boss," Clem interposed. "Jack Gurley, of course, and the rest of his Caribbean plug-uglies. And right up to date, too. A sub-machine gun and everything. They came near ringing Bill's bell for him this time."

Mr. Steel cursed with a whole-hearted enthusiasm that was beyond anything in William's experience.

"We'll have to take things into our own hands, I guess," he said presently. "The government won't do anything, with every hand, from the Minister of the Interior down, greased with Caribbean Oil Company pesos. And of course Jack Gurley would give his right arm to get even with Bill for running him off the job."

THIS, William considered, was just about the last straw. To suddenly learn that a complete stranger lusted for his heart's blood was not exactly pleasant bearing. Of all the men in the world, William would have thought himself to be the very last to have enemies. Now Clem added to his unease.

"Listen, Mr. Steel," Clem said. "We decided to have a nice, peaceable day off. We just had a couple of quick ones at the Seville, and got feeling pretty good—not drunk, you understand." William eyed him crossly. Years ago, when a freshman at college, William had got drunk on a dare. He had not cared for the experience. The temporary exhilaration had certainly not been worth the hangover that had followed, nor the after-knowledge that he had walked up to the captain of the Varsity team and threatened to punt his head the length of Soldier's Field. To the best of his knowledge he had not taken a drink since that shameful episode. "We ran into Gurley," Clem continued, "and Bill, here, told him if he didn't keep off our leases, he'd pull his heart out and slap him in the mouth with it. Well, Gurley only had two of his strong-arm men with him, so I guess he figured he better wait till his gun crew was around. Later, at the American Club, Bill cleaned up three hundred and eighty berries at stud, but when we came out, there was Jack Gurley and those New York gunmen. We ducked, but not quite in time. That's when I thought they'd blown out Bill's light. They must of found out that they only beaned him, because when Bill totters out of the hospital, they're waiting in a big Caddie and don't come very far from getting us."

"Listen, Mr. Steel," William blurted. "So far as——"

But Clem's hard eye swivelled at him with an expression of earnest warning. William clamped his lips together. The whole thing was too fantastic. Mr. Steel, he now realized, would not believe a word of it. And William would presently find himself in a nice safe place where he could count his thumbs and play he was Napoleon. Better just to be quiet and say nothing. With three hundred and eighty dollars he could buy a passage back to New York. Three hundred and eighty dollars? And won at stud? Three dollars and eighty cents won playing contract at a twentieth a point would have been believable, but the other was as incredible as all the rest.

"Listen, you two," Mr. Steel was saying grimly; "if we don't watch ourselves, the Caribbean outfit will have us on the run. The only way we can keep on here is by producing oil and remembering that possession is nine points of the law. If we stop our rigs, or if we leave this field, the Minister of the Interior will allow the Caribbean to take over. Beside Gurley's personal hatred for you, Blake, he wants you out of the way, because with our armed guards taken care of, we're vulnerable to attack, and don't think he doesn't know exactly that. This morning one of our *mozos* brought in the rumor that the Caribbean outfit is going to dynamite our rigs and fire our wells some night soon. They'll claim, of course, that they had

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nothing to do with it—that the bandits did it. I'm going to be frank with you boys. With the dry holes we drilled in Yucatan and Field No. 3 running to salt, the company can't afford right now to have that kind of trouble." He looked at William. "You have the stuff in you, Blake, and I'm going to tell you that if you keep on the way you're going now you're due for a superintendent's job. But there's just this: the best defense is a sudden offense. *See that our field here isn't bothered!*"

WITH that he spun on his heel and marched grimly toward the canvas and board building that was his field office and dwelling, all in one.

"You know what he meant?" Clem asked, his gray eyes bright with excitement. "The lid is off. We're to fight them with their own weapons. The sky's the limit, big boy, and the only thing we'll

catch hell for is not getting results. Hot ziggedy—old Bill Blake, a super! Isn't that a gag?"

It wasn't worth while telling him again that the name was Baker. Nor that William Henry Baker was an advertising man, not an oil man. Nothing seemed worth while now that everything was so mixed up. Aimlessly William followed Clem toward a small, screened tent which stood at the north corner of the hollow square. Clem held the mosquito bar aside and William entered. There were two cots within, and a clothes press and a wash stand with a tin pitcher and bowl.

"Here, Bill," Clem said, fussing with something at the clothes press. He turned and handed William a tumbler filled full of a colorless liquid. "This is what the doctor ordered. It will make you want to laugh and play. Toss it off."

William was too low in his mind to protest. He drank the liquid, which burned a blazing path to his stomach. White fire crept through his veins. He gasped and wiped hot tears from his eyes. Clem watched him with approval.

"Gosh, Bill," he said in a voice husky with relief, "you sure had me scared for a while. You weren't the same guy at all. Now listen, get some clean whites on and I'll take you over to the hacienda. You're late now."

Automatically William accepted another half tumbler of the fiery liquid. He drank it. He was, he realized with a sudden lightening of the heart, feeling very much better.

"What hacienda?" he asked.

"Rosita's, of course."

William, five minutes ago, would have declined even to consider going to the hacienda of this Rosita person. But now, with a full half pint of white-eye doing strange things to him, the matter took on a different light. He reminded himself that in a few days he would be back in New York, picking up the threads of a life as completely unexciting as any life could be, so there could be no harm in squeezing into these few days memories that would have to last him to the very end of time. Certainly Frances would not object. His heart warmed to the thought of Frances. She was a wonderful girl, dependable, capable, practical—but life with her would go on much as it had in the past, on a safe, even tenor with a minimum of emotional upsets or excitements.

"Listen, Clem," William said speculatively, "what sort of a girl is this Rosita? Do you see much of her?"

"Me?" demanded Clem. "Nix! She scares me. She's one of these high-falutin' land-owner's daughters, with ninety-nine generations of old Spanish grandees behind her who keep reminding her that she ought

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to forget the American finishing school she went to, and act like a perfect Viscayan lady. How a big tough mug like you ever got past the front door is beyond me, but after you ran those Caribbean lease-hounds off her place, you were aces with her, you big stiff!"

NO USE to ask questions, William decided. There were so many things to be explained that it would be better just to drift along, taking the breaks as they came. At least he would take home much to remember, much to tell Frances during the long quiet evenings which would stretch out, thousands of them, through all the rest of his life.

"Make it snappy, Bill," Clem said. "We got to be back here comes sundown. No telling when the Caribbeean outfit'll sic a lot of gun-toting bandits on the camp."

Several suits of white linens, two of Shantung pongee and a number of khaki field outfits hung on racks within the clothes press, but there was no neat, serviceable suit of blue serge. William shrugged and selected one of the linens. He acknowledged with no particular concern that the drinks were probably responsible for the new exhilaration that was slowly possessing him. His head no longer ached very much and on the whole he was feeling pretty good. Not at all unpleasant, that prickly feeling in his hands and feet, that strange, reckless wish to laugh and to go places and do things.

He stole a glance into the mirror. Again he was astonished, and not at all displeased, at the new hardness that was etched on his lean, bronzed face. Suddenly his blue eyes narrowed as he inspected his reflection. Put a big sombrero over that turban-like bandage, and a pair of crossed gun belts around his slender waist and he'd be—Yes, it was unmistakable, that startling resemblance to his father! The same restless, humorous quirk to the corners of his new, hard lips, the new mouth that was so different from that he had seen in the glass before the accident. Almost he was looking at his father as he had seen him years and years ago.

William remembered now, as he stood gazing at the mirrored replica of an older, gayer Bill Baker, how his mother had methodically set her son's young feet to marching in set, safe grooves. Never had she told tales of romance under a hot, bright moon. And when Bill Baker, adventurer, had bought a guitar and had sat, cross-legged, plucking the strings, humming strange, nostalgic songs in an unknown language, looking up into a corner of the room and seeing things that weren't there at all, William remembered that she had accidentally broken the instrument.

"Hey, Bill," Clem complained. "If I'm to taxi you over there, let's go."

William took a long breath. It was nice to be called Bill. A William could never have been chief guard over a tough oil crew. But a Bill could. He squared his big shoulders.

"Fair enough," he said, with something of a swagger. "Let's go."

IV

YOUNG Bill Baker had read books of romance, novels of swift adventure in steaming jungles, stories of glamorous señoritas in old houses with patios, and palms, and tinkling fountains. He had liked these stories, and his blood had run hot as he thought of his father, perhaps doing the very things being done by the heroes of fiction. And now he, Bill—not William any more—Baker was following Clem past a deep-bowing *portero* past gates that were weary with the years that were on them. There was no fountain in the patio, but there were palms, and Bill's pulses pounded as he studied the time-softened outlines of a house that had been venerable when Greenwich Village had been farmland.

"I'll be leaving you," Clem said, coming to a stop. "I got too many hands and feet to play around inside."

"You come along!" Bill commanded in

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sudden panic. "So far as I know I've never seen this place in my life."

Clem's eyes rolled reproachfully. "Nix, Bill, nix!" he begged. "You're all over your little spell. Never seen this place before? Baby, when I think how you used to cry in your sleep because the señorita wouldn't give Massey the bum's rush and ——"

"Who's Massey?"

Clem sighed. "Honest, Bill, if I didn't know you, I'd think—Oh, well! Massey's the resident manager of the Caribbean Oil Company, and a big shot. What he thinks of you for being allowed here would make a mule-skinner faint dead away."

"Didn't you say the man who shot me—Gurley—was of the Caribbean Oil Company?"

"He," said Clem, not too patiently, "is Massey's jackal, bribe artist, chief guard and handy man."

THERE was no more opportunity for explanations. They were approaching the big, arcaded façade of the dwelling. Within the arcade was the thick wall of the house itself. It contained but one door, and that large enough for a mounted horseman to ride through. An Indian servant, vacant-eyed after the manner of his kind, shuffled forward on grass sandals. Clem, after waiting a moment for Bill to speak, returned the *mozo's* salutation and added some sonorous phrases in the Latin tongue.

"Would you be trying to tell me," he demanded when the servant had gone, "that you've forgotten your Spanish?"

"Did I ever know it?" Bill asked.

But before Bill could answer, a girl had appeared in the great, dim arch of the door. Bill's heart rose, turned over and settled slowly back into place. She was small, and young, and amazingly beautiful. Her black hair was parted at the little widow's peak on her high forehead and combed sleekly back over her ears. Her eyes, too, were black beneath the dark curved line of her brows. They were slightly almond-shaped, and Bill thought them the most beautiful he had ever seen. Her straight, slim shoulders were covered by a gorgeous *mantón* of heavy silk, upon which was embroidered a flaming flower of scarlet. Bill did not know he was staring, but the girl did, and a quick flood of crimson appeared beneath her clear olive skin.

"What," she asked in a throaty contralto that bore no trace of Spanish accent, "is the matter with your head?"

"I bumped it," Bill said, solemnly. "That's why we're late."

"Come in," she said, "both of you, and have some coffee."

"Thanks a million," Clem said hastily, "but I've got some work to do on the car."

And before the others could stop him he was gone, scuttling gleefully out on some mischief of his own and leaving Bill alone. Rosita's imperious eyes swung up to Bill's bandage.

"You're lying to me," she said flatly. "You've been fighting again."

BILL'S lips twitched in a reckless grin that he would not have recognized, could he have seen it in the mirror.

"So what?" he asked this lovely girl whom he had never, so far as he knew, seen before.

She was spoiled, arrogant and self-willed; that even he, who did not know girls well, could tell instantly. She possessed the haughtiness of the Latin, yet somehow mixed with the directness of the American schoolgirl—that, he reasoned quickly, was because she had gone to school in the States. Now she shrugged those proud young shoulders and turned her back on him, walking into the vast, high-ceilinged living room that alone was large enough to quarter in comfort a full company of men—and perhaps had done so during the years that had flowed through its dimness.

Bill followed her across a stone floor worn smooth by centuries of patient feet. His imagination was doing queer things. He had a sense that he was amid familiar

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surroundings, yet his memory knew no single detail of this enormous room.

Rosita, her face sultry, turned. "I can't offer you coffee after all," she said. "Mr. Massey is coming."

"In that case," he said promptly, "I'll stay. I can think of things I'd like to say to him."

"What he wants to see me about," she said arrogantly, "is personal."

"I'll put my fingers in my ears," he grinned, "so I can't hear."

She glanced meaningly at the bandage which covered his bright red head. "I think that whatever happened to your head must have dented your brain."

"I wonder!" Bill said. And, at that very moment, he *was* wondering. It would have been no surprise to him had he suddenly awakened in some New York hospital, to have some nurse say, "There, there! You're just delirious!" But if this were delirium, it was very pleasant, and he resolved to postpone the awakening as long as possible. The thought of J. Allison Halliday, Advertising, was, just now, abhorrent. As if another voice, that of a complete stranger, were speaking, he heard himself say, "Did I ever tell you how beautiful you are?"

Her level black eyes flickered and she turned away. Bill followed her, drawn by the invisible tug of her personality. Suddenly she wheeled upon him, her face flushed and angry.

"Go away!" she blazed at him. "You're just another of these *Yanqui* pigs who want what flows beneath the ground of my land! When my father died he warned me that you would come! Oh, he didn't tell me your name, but——" Her voice choked. She drew a long breath. Then, "You and Massey and all the rest, you're all alike!"

He stood very still, looking down at her. He tried to focus his mind upon the things and the people he knew, upon the hurrying crowds on Broadway, upon the office and—and upon Frances. But in the eyes of his mind he saw them slipping slowly, irrevocably, across a dim horizon, and across the horizon beyond that, and so out of his life. Desperately, because he was not yet prepared to throw away his tiller and go sailing rudderless across uncharted seas, he tried to summon them back.

"Listen," he said gravely, "I want to tell you something. You may not believe it, but here it is; to the best of my knowledge I've never seen you before in my life."

The white-hot anger faded from her face. In its place came cold indignation, while her eyes struck into his as if in search for some silly joke.

"Will you please go?" she asked frigidly. "Or must I go up stairs and leave you to the servants?"

"Listen," he said, once again. "I'm not kidding. I told you you wouldn't believe it, but you might as well hear me through."

And then he told her—everything. Her stormy eyes searched his as he talked; the storm died out of them and they became friendly again. That was good. He wanted very much for them to be friendly. She said no word until he was done.

"You mustn't stay," she said then. "You may have forgotten Massey and Gurley, but they haven't forgotten you. And when Massey comes, Gurley comes with him, of course."

"Never mind Massey and Gurley!" he said impatiently. "What about my forgetting you—forgetting everything?"

"Amnesia," she said simply. "I've heard of it."

"Yes," he admitted glumly. "So have I. I've read about it in the newspapers—about its happening to other people, but I never expected it to happen to me. The knock I got on the head in New York must have batted all the memory out of my mind. How I managed to get down here I don't know, unless I remembered, sub-consciously, the tales my father told, years and years ago, of the Hot Countries, and of this one, especially. Then—the crack I got from Gurley's gun this morning, or last night, must have tipped the scales right back to where my mind was when I started to jaywalk across the avenue. And you

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say this Gurley onion is coming——"

"Your father?" she murmured. "My father had a friend whose name was not unlike yours. He was a famous *Yanqui aventurero*. When my father was Minister of War, Don Bill Baker organized a——"

"Bill Baker?" The young man's eyes blazed with excitement. "Why, that's my own name! And this Don Bill Baker must be my father! Where does he live—or is—is he still alive?"

"Of course!" Rosita exclaimed, catching the infection of his excitement. "He no longer fights. He has retired from the wars. He lives in a small house some miles from here. But he is *muy caballero* and is very much loved by those who do not fear and hate him for the fighter he was once. While my father lived——"

BILL wheeled toward the door. "I'm going to get Clem to take me to him! Does he know the way?"

"Wait!" Rosita commanded.

She walked swiftly from the room. Bill remained there, his senses awhirl. What invisible string had inevitably pulled him

toward this place where his father was; what nameless force, unleashed when the orderly current of his life had been turned aside? And how, he asked himself, could he have been in this country two years without learning, somehow, that his father was here? Absent-mindedly he walked back and forth across the great room, trying to dig into the locked pockets of his mind to drag forth the hidden keys to all this mystery.

Rosita returned, and Bill was shocked to realize how his pulses leaped at sight of her.

"Clem isn't here right now," she said. "When he returns, you can get him to take you to your father. And now let's talk about something else. If I were true to my breeding, I should tell you to go away——"

"You did," he reminded her with an impudent grin.

"Because," she went on, crinkling her perky nose at him, "I don't know this Don William Baker who is you. But is it? Are you Don Bill, or Don William?"

"I wish," he said, from the depths of his heart, "that I knew!"

V

COFFEE was announced by one of the servants. It was peaceful—yet—in that walled patio. A soft, sweet wind washed down from the towering purple Cordilleras and carried the heat away with its passing. There was a scent of growing things, of lush green earth, and of strange, exotic plants and of many things far, far removed from the hot asphalt and motor exhausts which had stifled him in New York. They made him vaguely uneasy, these heady fragrances, stirring his senses and making him wish that he were really the kind of man that Clem—and Rosita—thought him to be. There was something in the very air that made him long to do great brave deeds, to become a swashbuckling soldier of fortune, blazing his way, like Bolivar, through the history of the Hot Countries. But he knew, of course, that these were just dreams. Bill—or was it William?—was a practical young man. He wrote good advertising copy, and some day he might be head of the copy department of J. Allison Halliday, Advertising. Pretty soon he would be back in New York, hoping he had not lost his job by his absence.

Rosita was sitting in a wicker chaise-longue, within reaching distance of a small table, upon which were set coffee and a crystal decanter of colorless liquid. Bill

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had chosen a chair as close to her as possible. The coffee was thick and sweet. Absurdly conscious of the heavy weight of the automatic strapped against his left breast, he drank a thimbleful of the liqueur from the decanter. And then, because Rosita apparently expected him to—and because it felt good—he drank another.

In peaceful silence they sipped their coffee and cointreau, neither wanting, somehow, to speak. It was as if both wished this to be a moment to remember when things would have changed very greatly, one way or another. Later, thinking back, Bill could never quite recall just how long they sat there, he and this glamorous, dark-eyed girl, but presently the gatekeeper bowed low at the breach in the stone wall.

Rosita's eyes came back from some far distance. She stiffened in her chair. "Señor Massey!" she said tensely.

After that, there was no more time to drink potent white liquid from tiny glasses and to feel it burning pleasantly through one's veins. Nor was the patio peaceful again for a long time. Mr. Massey, it appeared, was not alone.

"The tall, bald one," Rosita said, "is the gunman, Gurley!"

VI

RONALD F. MASSEY, except for the bone-deep bronze of his skin, looked like an American business man, which, of course, he was. Dressed in immaculate whites, with a hundred-dollar Panama in his hands, he advanced across the time-smoothed stones, his shrewd, narrowed gaze swivelling quickly from Rosita to Bill, who was rising slowly, warily, from his chair.

Never, to his knowledge, had Bill seen a gunman, yet he told himself that he would have known the other, the man Gurley, to have been a killer without being told. He had bad eyes, pale, uneasy, and half-hidden under heavy lids. They had a flat stare to them that was as deadly as nightshade. Very tall, perhaps six feet three, he walked with a curious bent-knee shuffle, like a boxer advancing cautiously into the center of the ring. He had removed his greasy sombrero; there was not a hair on his head, not even on his brows nor fringing his drooping lids. As his quick stare rested briefly upon Bill, his right hand lifted instinctively toward the lapel of his khaki Norfolk jacket. But something in Bill's attitude reassured him. His hand dropped back to his side, empty.

The executive bowed punctiliously over Rosita's hand, while Bill and Gurley just looked at one another over a dozen feet of silent enmity.

"My house, such as it is, is yours, *caballeros*," Rosita said, lapsing into Latin formality.

Bill did not understand, but he saw a sardonic grin flick across Gurley's bloodless lips. He did not like that grin and was tempted to tell the man so. He did not like anything about Gurley, and he felt his scalp prickling with a rising hatred that astonished him with its vehemence. There had been other people in his life whom he had disliked, but never before had he known this itching desire to be at the man with his two hands reaching for that scrawny windpipe.

Mr. Massey turned to Bill. "I see you had an accident, Blake," he said, with a mock solicitude that set Bill's teeth on edge.

"Don't give it a thought," Bill said, smiling falsely. "I was just scratching my head and a fingernail slipped."

"You're hard to kill," Gurley said flatly.

Bill looked at him. "Yes. Very."

"I hear," Massey said sugesstively, "that bandits are around. Hadn't you better be getting back to your camp?"

"I'm sure," said Bill smoothly, "that you can control them by a look, or a word—or maybe a handful of pesos."

Massey's face did not change, but the pupils of his eyes expanded, then contracted. Bill knew he had scored. The man turned away with a sudden motion. He took a chair, sat down and hitched it

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around until he had, with deliberate discourtesy, turned his back to Bill. Rosita, her face pale beneath the clear olive of her skin, made no sign to the Indian servant who would have brought additional coffee service for the callers.

"I have things to say to you, Señorita," Massey said, "if Blake has finished his visit."

"I haven't," Bill said pleasantly. "But go ahead and talk. I don't mind."

Gurley's snake-like eyes wheeled to his employer. Massey hesitated briefly, while Bill's muscles suddenly went taut. Massey shrugged.

"You're a bear for punishment, Blake," he said.

"I can take it," Bill admitted, blandly.

"I wonder?" Massey said, lifting his bushy brows. Then, to Rosita, "What I have to say, Señorita, is personal. Do you wish him to hear it?"

ROSITA'S brave young eyes met Bill's, and lingered. Bill smiled cheerfully.

"Just pretend I'm not here at all," he suggested.

"I asked him," Rosita said evenly, "to stay."

"Ah," said Massey, speculatively. "That answers, then, the question I asked you yesterday afternoon, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid it does," Rosita said.

"Perhaps," Massey said, "you would do well to reconsider. I could offer you security. Now that Don José, your father, is dead, you need security very much. Your hacienda, placed in the midst of oil country where bandits roam at will, is no place for a lovely girl to live alone."

To his own surprise, Bill spoke up. "Would the bandits be natives," he asked mildly, "or employees of the Caribbean Oil Company?"

Massey did not turn in his chair, but his ears turned to a bright pink. Gurley was not looking at Bill. He was watching his employer, and his feet were tucked well under his chair, his body poised forward as if ready to catapult upward like that of a jack-in-the-box.

"I ought to warn you," Massey continued presently, "that there is some talk of the Government placing these oil lands of yours under the public domain and——"

That, Bill thought, explained much. He knew little about the skullduggeries of the oil business, but the liquid gold which flowed beneath Rosita's acres was at the bottom of everything. Either the Caribbean desired these lands, or Massey did, personally and— With an effort he snapped his mind to attention.

"—and I could offer you moderate wealth," Mr. Massey was saying, "and freedom from confiscation of your lands, and an unquestioned social position——"

"I believe," Bill broke in, "that he's trying to propose to you, Rosita. How cosy, with us all sitting here!"

Now Massey turned and looked full at him. A tiny cold shiver raced up and down Bill's spine as he saw the wild hatred which, for a brief instant, exploded in those narrowed eyes. Suddenly it came to him that he was, right now, closer to death than he had been when that taxi charged down on him and knocked his memory haywire. He knew that he should be scared. William Henry Baker, advertising man, who had never within his knowledge done anything more dangerous than to jaywalk—what place had he here, where battle, murder and sudden death were like a gathering fog in the very air he breathed? Where, he wondered swiftly, was Clem?

WITHOUT being conscious that his arm moved at all, Bill found his right hand gripped tightly around the corrugated butt of his automatic. Where had he learned that trick of reaching for his armpit holster? He smiled politely at Massey, watching him intently for some signal to Gurley, who would be the man to start things moving into catastrophe.

"Unless you want us to give it to you,"

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Massey said in a strangled voice, "get out!"

It wouldn't be long now, Bill thought, wondering, at the same time, why he did not get up and go. A nod of Massey's head, a wink of the eye, perhaps, would start it. Where was Clem? Together he and Clem could handle anything.

"Are you going?" that choked, insistent voice of Massey's demanded. Bill could see his hand. It was shaking with rage. It was time to go. Two against one. And he was no fighter. Yes, if he wanted to go on living, there was just about time right now. But he sat quite still. His finger crawled beneath his coat and found the trigger of the automatic. "Gurley——" Massey began.

And then his words ended. His eyes shifted. He was not even looking at his gunman. He was staring toward the *portero's* lodge. Something in his changing expression made Bill follow the line of his intent, astonished gaze.

VII

CLEM, smiling raffishly, was sauntering through the gate. With him was a gray-headed man who was broad of shoulder, slim, despite his age, of waist, and who walked with an easy, long-limbed stride which cut into Bill's memory like a knife. A ten-gallon hat was cocked jauntily over the man's left eyebrow and crisscrossing his lean thighs was a pair of well-filled gun holsters.

Bill shot out of his chair. Gurley's feet moved a fraction of an inch; his hairless face was deadly quiet. Bill had, for the moment, forgotten Gurley. His long legs carried him swiftly to the great stone columns of the arcade. There he stopped, suddenly embarrassed.

"Hello, son," said the older man, his extraordinarily bright blue eyes darting from Bill's face to Gurley, then to Massey and back again, all in the space of a few heartbeats. Yet Bill had the feeling that his father had seen everything, had appraised and measured the static quality of death that was in the air, and needed no explanations—of anything. "You've been growing, boy. I hear they've been shooting you up."

"Oh-oh!" said Massey, with a falling inflection. "That explains a lot. The Jaguar's cub, eh?"

Without a movement of his wiry body, the gray head turned. "And a pretty good cub, by the looks of him," Bill's father said evenly. "And from what I've heard of him, these past two years, the joke's on me. I should have known he was mine."

It was difficult to imagine, now, this hard, ageless man, this man with the recklessly humorous lips and the look of far

countries in his eyes, trying to adjust himself to the dull routine of conventional existence in a four-room New York apartment. Thinking this, Bill realized for the first time exactly why his father had played the guitar and sung strange, wistful songs in Spanish and why, after a while, he had gone away.

"Did you know they called your father 'The Jaguar,' Bill?" Clem asked happily.

No, Bill hadn't. The fame of The Jaguar had been dimmed by time; now it was a legend which, if heard at all, was lost with that great chunk of memory somehow blotted out of his mind. But it did not matter now. Everything was all right. There was that about his father which told him so.

"Greetings, señorita," said Mr. Baker

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politely. "I see you haven't been bothered by the bandits."

"What bandits?" Rosita asked, while Bill wondered if a quick glance had really passed between Massey and his gunman.

"They left their trade-mark upon the road between here and my *finca,*" Mr. Blake said. He looked at Massey. "Or would they be some of your—er, oil men?"

"No," said Massey, this time definitely looking at Gurley.

MR. BLAKE'S direct gaze swung from Gurley to Massey.

"Which of you," he asked crisply, "turned your guns on the cub, here? Tell me. I want to know."

"Never mind, Dad," Bill interposed quickly. "I'll handle that myself."

Gurley's lashless lids lifted, exposing the flat stare of his uncurtained eyes. Now it was gathering again; Bill could smell death in the air. His father could smell it, too. Of that Bill was certain. Gurley and Massey weren't doing a thing but just sitting there, yet they were as dangerous as coiled bushmasters waiting to strike. Bill ranged up beside his father, and he found Clem sliding in after him. In a jam they could both—he and Clem—take comfort from that solid, competent figure; side by side they could make a job of it.

"Massey," said Mr. Blake, his voice still crisp, "had you forgotten that Rosita's father, Don José, was a friend of mine?"

"What of it?"

"Just this: When he died, he asked me to keep an eye on the girl, here, especially because he had learned there was seepage here and there on the lands. He knew that buzzards would flap around at the scent of oil. Speaking of buzzards, what are you two doing here?"

"He's been asking her to marry him," Bill said.

"He's a forgetful feller," Bill's father sighed regretfully. "He forgets that Rosita's father was a friend of mine; he forgets to inquire just who you were before he turns his New York gun-squad loose on you, and now he's forgetting that dark girl—what was her name, Conchita?—he promised to marry five or six years ago in Puerto Lucia. If you should remember Conchita, Massey, and want to find her, she's singing in that sailor's *cantina* down by the fruit wharves."

Massey's face, which had been crimson, was now white. He squinted across at Gurley.

"If you'll get that present that's in the car for the señorita, Gurley," he said hoarsely, "we'll be going."

Slowly, lest he alarm some poised gun hand, Gurley unfolded his great length and stood up. Here it was. Bill did not know what was going to happen, but he knew that a crisis was coming immediately. Standing close to his father, Bill felt the muscles of the older man's arm stiffen against his side. But Gurley, still moving cautiously, strolled toward the patio gate.

"For two cents," Mr. Baker said doubtfully, "I'd give it to him, right in the back. It would save trouble later on."

"I'll do it," said Clem grimly, and a gun appeared in his hand.

"Gurley!" Massey called. "Look out!"

"Sit still, Massey," Mr. Baker commanded.

But Bill, like the oil man, had forgotten too much. He had forgotten, among other things, that if you had a killing to do, the back was just as good a place as any—maybe a little bit better.

"No, Clem!" he snapped, dashing Clem's up-swinging arm down with his hand.

Gurley cast one startled glance over his shoulder. He began to run, covering the ground to the gate in enormous strides, his attenuated body bent double as he raced toward safety. He skidded around the wall, lost to view.

"Tsk, tsk!" Mr. Baker said, mournfully. "You should have let the kid shoot him, son. We may have trouble killing him before long."

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THEN, and not until then, did the older man move. As if some special sense, known to him only, telegraphed a warning to his brain, he spun around to face Massey. His two hands dropped down to his guns, seemed to bounce back into the air. And Massey, in the act of aiming his own automatic, let his hand fall nervelessly to his side. He was staring straight into the muzzles of two big revolvers, scarcely three feet from his nose.

"Drop it!" Mr. Baker said, succinctly.

The automatic clattered to the ground. Bill retrieved it, then passed it to Rosita.

"Know how to use it?" he asked.

She was pale, but her dark eyes were brave. "Yes," she said steadily.

"Hang onto it, then," Bill said.

"Up on your feet, Massey," Mr. Baker commanded. "I think this party's going to get rough. We'll all enjoy it from the house."

THEY poured through the gate behind Gurley, four North American gunmen and a score or so of natives. They came looking for trouble. The natives came whooping in anticipation of loot; the Americans were hard, silent men who carried guns with the familiarity of long use.

"No sense in waiting," Mr. Baker said. "Into the house, everybody."

His right hand flashed upward in a bright arc. His big revolver exploded, twice. But Gurley was paid to kill, not to die. A split-second before the revolver banged he had ducked behind a charging *mozo*. The bandit fell, while Gurley came out firing.

Curiously, a great sense of relief came over Bill, even as curious snapping noises sounded in his ears. He had waited hours for this, it seemed, and now it had come. Those snapping sounds were bullets and Bill was delighted to find that he was not afraid. Excited, yes, yet his heartbeats were as steady as the beat of a metronome as he grabbed Rosita by her slender wrist and swung her toward the big front door. He slammed Clem with his shoulder, getting the youngster started when Clem was mutinously trying to wait for the others to go first. He skipped around his father, who was pushing Massey toward the house. He grabbed the oil man by his coat collar and swung him around to face the invaders who were streaming wildly across the patio.

"All right," Bill snarled. "Tell 'em to keep on shooting and see where the bullets land!"

Massey squirmed, trying to ease his body out of his coat. With cold savagery Bill tucked his own gun into his waist band and slapped Massey's face once, twice, thrice. At each slap the man's head bobbed and bright color marked every outline of Bill's outstretched hand. At the third slap Massey's knees buckled. Bill yanked him back to his feet.

"Don't hit me again!" Massey screamed. "Gurley, don't shoot!"

Just behind Gurley was a man with a machine gun. He sidestepped, swung the two-handled gun to position. Bill's father fired carefully. A blue spot on the man's forehead quickly turned scarlet. Quite leisurely the gunman dropped to his hands and knees, paused there a moment and then, as if too tired to go on, lay flat on the ground and did not move again.

Then, somehow, Bill was in the house, dragging Massey behind him. Clem was locking and barring the massive door—a two-inch slab of solid mahogany.

"Nice work, cub," said Bill's father—The Jaguar who could not den in the brick-and-concrete cliffs of New York—"but you needn't be so all-fired impetuous."

THINGS were happening outside. Feet were scuffling on the stones of the arcade—the hob-nailed boots of Gurley, the street shoes of the imported gunmen, the bare, calloused feet of the bandits. Clem was trying to close the long, narrow windows of the galleried room. A rattle of gunfire caused him to pull in his grin-

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ning head like a turtle. Rosita was trying to find her Indian servants, but they had vanished.

"Nice, clean business, this oil game," Bill's father said, feeding cartridges into the cylinder of a revolver. "Massey, you always were a rat, weren't you?"

"I can't control these bandits!" Massey shouted. "Better make terms with them—you and Rosita both. When they get in it'll be bad for all of you—especially for her!"

"If anything happens to her," Bill said distinctly, "you won't be able to die half as fast as you'd like to. I'll see to that myself."

"Yes?" Massey sneered, touching his bright red cheek on which a perfect hand-print of Bill's could be seen. "And where'll you be then?"

But Bill had turned away. A flame-colored drape was hanging from a window sill. He dragged this down, wound it around Massey until the man was like a mummy, wrapped from heels to neck. He tucked the end of the fabric through a fold, upended Massey and carried him, spitting and cursing, to a great divan in the corner, where he flung him down like a sack of cement.

From the other side of the big door came Gurley's muffled voice.

"Open that door and let Mr. Massey out!" he shouted. "Then we'll talk terms."

"Talk what terms, and with whom?" Mr. Baker asked.

"With me, for one," came the reply, "and with the bandits, for the rest."

"Get furniture up against that door," Mr. Baker whispered. Then aloud, "Well, what are your terms?"

"Give Mr. Massey a lease on the oil here and——"

"In his own name?" Mr. Baker asked. "Or in the name of the Caribbean Oil Company?"

"Ask him!" Gurley yelled after a moment's hesitation.

BUT Mr. Baker did not bother to ask questions. He walked to the door, measured it quickly with his eyes. Then, aiming his guns at the panel—stomach-level—he pulled the triggers fast and, when his hammers clicked emptily, sidestepped quickly from the mahogany slab. The big room roared with the detonations of his heavy guns, but through the reverberations could be heard a high-pitched scream of agony from the other side.

"That," said Clem critically, "doesn't sound like an American yell. Better luck next time."

A dozen bullets ripped inward through the panel, leaving a splintery pattern on the ancient wood. A more ominous sound crashed into the room—the tac-tac-tac of a sub-caliber machine gun. A ragged semi-circle of holes began to eat its way around the lock. Bill, standing aside, sent six quick shots smashing through the door. The machine gun stopped its clatter for a moment, then started again, methodically cutting the door away from its fastening.

"About twenty-five to three," Bill's father said, thoughtfully. "And they'll have that door open pretty soon. Clear the way to the second floor. They'll have trouble smoking us out of there."

Rosita, showing no sign of the fear that must have been in her, helped Clem and Bill push chairs, tables and heavy couches against the door. It was hard work, and dangerous, but she did her part. Massey, his eyes venomous, watched them silently from his cocoon of scarlet drapes. From time to time his body twisted spasmodically, but the fabric held him as tightly as a straight-jacket. It was now almost impossible to speak, except at a shout. The natives were yelling outside; the constant rattle of the machine gun, patiently biting its way around the lock of the door, was deafening, and the deep-voiced bark of Mr. Baker's big revolvers punctuated the whole at regular intervals.

There was a heavy crash against the outside of the door. Bill's heart sank. They were using a battering ram of some

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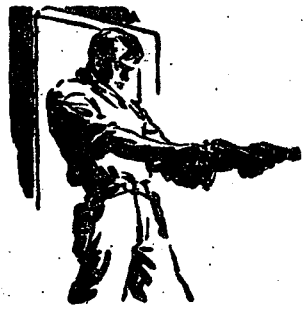
sort out there and the already-weakened lock was giving. Now there were only the bars and the furniture which had been piled up against the inner side. It would not be long now. Yet, oddly, he was conscious of no sense of fear—he, whose remembered life had been spent in the quiet havens of school, college and copy room! He tried to project his mind back to New York, and to Frances, who did not even like motion pictures in which there was action, gunfire, but the picture would not come. Now, with confusion all



about, with Rosita, her dark eyes steady, beside him, he could not even remember the color of Frances's hair!

"What are you laughing at?" Rosita asked him.

"Was I laughing?" he said, pausing to fire twice at the door. "Well, I wouldn't quite know. Do you remember I told you you were very beautiful?"

"Fool!" she said, brusquely; but her smile was gentle.

NO, IT would not be long. A tiny sliver of light appeared at the corner of the door. Bill's gun hand was steady as he fired again and again at the door, but his left arm stole around Rosita's slender shoulders as if to protect her for what might be coming in a little while. He glanced at his father, at that weathered old-timer they called The Jaguar, and suddenly he felt closer to him than he ever had to his mother, who had died after convincing herself that her son would never stray from the safe, sane groove of business life. Trim and brown, hard and efficient, The Jaguar stood just out of range of the incoming bullets, his wise old eyes measuring the growing crack in the door. Queerly it came to Bill in this moment of chaos that there was more to life than security, than being able to look ahead to next year and the next and the next. His father had drunk deep of the wine of adventure, and, drunk with it, who was to say he had not really lived? There was ecstasy in raw danger—he, Bill Junior, cub of The Jaguar, was drinking deep of it right now, and in every nerve-end he was glorying in the high, bright moment it gave him. It could not last. In a few minutes he might be dead, but——

His left arm swung Rosita around. Her bright lips were sweet on his as he kissed her there in that rocking cataclysm of noise and gun-reek. That was the highest moment of all. Now he knew it—he was Bill, not William, and he would never be William again!

She hammered against his chest to free herself, but she was smiling with bruised lips as she pulled away.

"You know I love you, Don Bill!" she said.

And that was all. The Jaguar spun around on his heel. The door was coming down under the repeated crashing of the battering ram outside.

"Upstairs, everybody!" he called.

Clem, dancing excitedly on a table top as he fired rapidly through the grilled windows, yelled, "Hurry up, Bill! They'll make it next crack!"

BILL pushed Rosita ahead of him. He hurried over to the couch and picked up the great roll of drapery in which he had wound Massey. The oil man was still, now, but his eyes were open—wide, staring and infinitely wicked. His head fell limply back when Bill lifted him, and a great puddle of blood marked the spot where he had been lying. A stray bullet from outside—bought with his own oil-smeared gold—had done the trick.

"Well, you asked for it," Bill said to

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the dead man, and dropped him back on the couch.

Rosita was first up the stairs; Clem, protesting, was second. His eager young face was recklessly alight. He managed an impudent wink at Bill as he scampered up after the girl.

"Hot ziggedy, Bill!" he yelled joyously. "And I thought for a little while you'd gone sissy on me!"

Bill, climbing just behind the broad, unexcited back of his father, heard a resounding crash from the other side of the room. Looking down, he saw the great door pitch inward under the flailing blows of the battering ram.

Characteristically, Gurley failed to be first through the breach. One of his gunmen charged in first, his face drawn and ugly behind the flat bulk of his automatic. Bill's hand contracted and his own gun slammed back in his palm. The gunman fell and a dozen men trod on him as they sluiced in through the doorway. Bullets smacked against the ancient plaster wall behind Bill. Rosita had already gained the gallery. Clem was on the top step, emptying his gun down on the charging mob below. Bill's father grunted and stumbled on the second stair from the top, recovered himself and turned at the landing to fire over the mahogany banister.

THE bandits, crazily swinging guns and machetes, raced across the living room floor on their way to the gallery stairs. One of the American gunmen, dodging behind an upended table, rested the muzzle of his sub-calibre machine gun against the edge and aimed carefully upward.

"Back!" Bill yelled and plunged, just in time, for the protection of the wall at the end of the mahogany railing.

Bullets whined upward, ripped out a jagged section of plaster. Where, Bill wondered, was Gurley? He had not seen him in the throng that poured across the stone floor of the big room.

Half a dozen natives began to climb the stairs. It was easy to stop them. A chair, a heavy thing of ancient mahogany, stood beside Bill's elbow. He picked it up and hurled it down at the *mozos*.

"Ten-strike!" Clem cheered.

The chair, a deadly missile, whirled around and around before its swinging legs tore across the face of the topmost man. He screamed, fell and carried the others down with him. That stopped them for a moment. The others hesitated. The machine gunner was changing clips. In contrast to the catastrophic uproar of a few seconds before it was almost quiet on that gallery of the second floor.

"Good boy!" said Bill's father.

"Who'd have thought," Bill grinned, "that an advertising man could find himself in a ruckus like this?"

Bill's father coughed. "Son," he said, "Bakers have been fighters and wanderers since the first bog-trotting one of them was chased off the Old Sod for shooting at every red-coat he saw." He paused to cough. "That crack on the head just sidetracked you off the road your mother—God rest her disappointed bones!—put you on. It headed you down the line every Bill Baker for forty generations has trod. It was coming to you son, for it's in your blood—the blood of the old Jaguar himself! You won't get anywhere special, but you'll live—and you'll love—and you'll—fight and——"

"Dad!" Bill cried. "What's the matter? You hurt?"

"A little," the old man said, wiping a spot of red from his lips with the back of his hand. "And you'll—have—a—hell of a—good time!" he finished weakly.

Then he sat down, putting his back against the wall. Now Bill could see. A spreading stain on the faded khaki shirt. He bent down to rip the shirt away.

BUT just at that moment Rosita screamed. Downstairs the natives were beginning to climb again, urged upward by the American gunners behind them. Rosita screamed again. Bill

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charged past Clem, who was firing swiftly down the stairs. Rosita was flattened against the wall, looking toward a dark hallway behind her. And there, so tall that his head seemed to scrape the high ceiling was Gurley, bald and grinning, a gun in each hand.

Bill did not care about the guns. His father was dying. The mob would soon overpower Clem and himself. Then there would be only Rosita. The world had come to an end on the very day when he was just beginning to live. Well, he'd send Gurley to hell just a minute or two ahead of him. All this in the space of a fleeting instant as his body hurtled across the dozen feet of space which separated him from the man Gurley.

Gurley's gun roared, but Bill did not even hear it; did not feel the hot streak of wind which whipped past his ear. His body felt the comforting shock of its impact upon Gurley's lanky figure. They went down with a bone-jarring crash, but that was all right. There was a pink mist of hatred before Bill's eyes, obscuring the snarling, hairless visage of Gurley below him. Somewhere people were shooting, but Bill did not care. All the hatred in the world was focussed right here between these two, who knew that one of them would be dead before the other stood up.

Gurley, flat on his back, yanked his knee up. It struck Bill in the stomach, sending paralyzing agony through his entire body. But it did not paralyze his arms. He had dropped his gun, yet he had his fists, and both of them were hammering, hammering, down on that grimacing, upturned face below him, battering the nose to one side, causing bright scarlet to cover the place Gurley's teeth had been, hammering, hammering. Gurley's fists turned into claws. Frantically they raked down across Bill's face, gouging deep runnels which burned like fire. But Bill did not care. Advertising man? Hell *that* had been the dream, the period of amnesia, not this! This had always been his life, this wild, delirious joy in physical combat—before he had been born he was marked as The Jaguar's Cub, and for twenty-five of his twenty-seven years he had been caged, a jaguar himself, growing up swathed in lambskin.

"Bill!" Rosita's voice cut through all the noise.

Through his punch-drunk brain, through his blood-blurred eyes, he saw a bright sliver of metal descending upon him in a swishing arc. His fingers were dug deep into Gurley's windpipe. He couldn't get them free in time to stop that knife. His back muscles crawled in anticipation of the slicing steel. But a blinding streak of flame raced past his face. A deafening explosion nearly blew him from his place—astride Gurley's writhing body like a crazy jockey. Between his knees he could feel Gurley's muscles jerk spasmodically. Then they were not muscles any longer.

"Thanks, Rosita," he panted.

HE PUSHED himself dizzily to his feet. Now the world was coming back into focus. He could hear Clem's gun, and the trampling of men on the stairs, and others shooting from the room below. He reached over, grabbed Gurley's body and hoisted it up as if it weighed nothing at all. Holding it high aloft he strode, a macabre figure of blazing anger, to the head of the stairs. Gurley's dangling legs kicked Clem as they went by. Clem sidestepped and gasped as Bill stood there an instant, exposed to any shot that might be fired by the mob half-way down the stairs.

They looked up, natives and American gunmen alike. For a long, heartbreaking moment they stood there, staring up at the wild-eyed young *Yanqui,* who reminded the older among them of another Jaguar of twenty years back. They heard his voice, and it, too, was like the cry of The Jaguar, remembered over that long span of years.

"You've got Massey," Bill roared at

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them. "And now here's his partner!"

And with that he hurled Gurley down at them.

THAT was about all. One of the gangsters lifted his gun for a final shot but Clem, white-faced, took care of him. The rest fled, dragging their dead and wounded with them. From far in the muffled distance, from beyond the *Portero's* gate, could be heard the sound of hoof-beats, departing, and of a motor car, racing away into nowhere.

Bill, with hands suddenly gone tender, carried his father into a cool, dim chamber, fragrant with many flowers. There, on a great bed, old Bill Baker, The Jaguar, just seemed to be resting after the wars, and his face was very calm.

"At least," Bill said, after a while, "I knew him, even if it was only for a very little while."

Silently Clem left the room. He was practical, Clem was, and there was much cleaning to be done downstairs. He had no great ambitions. If he could just remain the friend of he who would now wear the name of The Jaguar, and fight with him, and clean up after him, Clem would be very content.

"A few hours ago," Bill said, slowly, while his fingers reached out for the comforting touch of Rosita's slim hand, "I'd have sent him back to the States—gone with him, rather. But now I know he'd want to be down here. And, of course, I'll be here, too."

"Come," Rosita said in her sweet, low voice. The gentle pressure of her hand led him through a narrow window that faced the majestic ranges of the Cordilleras whose summits seemed to be holding the sunset up. There was a narrow, grilled balcony outside the window, and they stood upon it, leaning against the time-weathered iron railing. "Massey was right in just one thing," she said, slowly. "This *hacienda* is not a place for me to live alone. Oil is under the ground, and where oil is, there is violence. What need have I for more money, yet there the oil is, and I know I can't keep it down there untouched."

"No," he said, holding her hand very tightly. "Of course you can't. Until you do something with it, there'll be violence and bloodshed."

"Listen, Bill," she said, after quite a long time. "Two months and—and exactly eight days ago—before you knew I was rich, you asked me to marry you. Won't—won't you ask me again?"

He turned and looked down into the cameo-clear oval of her lovely face. Now, at last, he was no longer groping through unrealities. This was reality, this new sureness that was in him. Everything fitted. His father couldn't have lived forever, but he had died with the knowledge that his man-child was no stoop-shouldered clerk, but one like himself—The Jaguar's Cub. And Frances, who had loved him in her own safe, intelligent way; she had thought him dead these two years, and so he was. She would hate the Bill who lived. And now this glorious dark-eyed Rosita, so essentially feminine, yet could—and had—killed a man in battle!

Her strong young fingers ruffled his thick red hair where it strayed from under his bandage. They pulled his head down and his pulses sang a wild sweet song as his lips found hers. There, he thought as time stopped in its march, was the end of the rainbow—the Jaguar's Cub had found himself at last!

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Adventurers All

A GOOD INDIAN

AFTER I had been demobilized at the end of the war, I found myself very restless. An offer to work for a nitrate concern down in Chile came my way and I accepted. But after a year the routine of the job got on my nerves, and when Stern, a fellow engineer, asked me how I would like to go prospecting in Peru with him, I eagerly accepted his offer.

Two months later, Stern, myself and five Quichas Indians, with six mules to carry our dunnage, where northeast of Lake Rogagua in Peru, there were numerous small streams in the locality and we panned dozens of them with very little success. Then one day we struck a rich bar and decided to work it.

For the next three weeks we labored hard. The Indians did not take kindly to the work and grumbled a great deal, but we kept them at it.

Then our food began to run low. The country was very sparsely inhabited and as far as we knew there was no one within miles of us. The *mote* (corn) which was the Indians' main staple was nearly all gone and the potatoes alone did not satisfy them. Stern and I decided that one of the Indians would have to fish to supplement the larder.

Jose, the only one of the five who had shown any real willingness to work, was our choice. The next morning I offered him the rod and reel that we carried, but he laughed and said that he could catch more his way. Before noon he was back with a dozen of the finest fish I had ever

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seen in Peru—or anywhere else for that matter. For the next week he repeated the performance every day.

One morning after he had gone Stern and I decided that we would like to see the method Jose used and we followed him upstream.

About two miles above the camp we came to a place where a small dam had been built across the stream, forming a pool. Against the edge of the dam were scores of small fish, floating on the surface, dead. There was no sign of Jose, however, and we decided that he must be farther upstream. Being thirsty we drank from the pool and went on.

A little farther on we found Jose. He had just finished another dam. He nodded to us and began to pick a sort of shrub. He pulled it up by the roots and then cut the latter away from the stem with his knife.

When he had a small pile of the roots, he placed them in a small hollow he scooped in the ground, after cutting them into small pieces. Then he poured water into the hollow and began to pound the chopped roots with a stone. In a few moments they were reduced to a grayish paste.

This paste he proceeded to scatter over the surface of the pool that had formed behind his dam. Stern and I watched to see what would happen. Soon the water became agitated and dozens of small fish appeared. They wiggled a few times and then turned their bellies up. They were dead.

A few moments later larger fish appeared. They did not seem so badly affected by the paste, but when Jose waded in after them he had no trouble in throwing a score of them to the bank.

It was our first demonstration of the Indian method of fishing with poison. I asked Jose if the poison would not be harmful to those who ate the fish, and he asked me with a grin if I had not felt quite well all week.

That night after supper, though, Stern and I were attacked with terrible cramps. In my agony, I cursed Jose and accused him of having poisoned us. Then I remembered that Stern and I had both taken a drink at the first pool. There was no doubt that some of the poison must have been in that water.

It was a nightmare for the next three days. I dimly recall Jose tending to me, the sun rising and setting. The pain was terrible.

ON THE morning of the fourth day the pain went away and I found myself so weak that I could not move. Jose came into the tent and smiled in delight when he saw that I was better. He gave me some coca leaves to chew. I guessed that he had been giving them to me all along to relieve the pain. Cocaine is obtained from them. I have seen Indians march for days, their only subsistence a few leaves.

The drug made me drowsy though and I fell asleep. About noon I was awakened by the groans of Stern on the cot across the tent. Jose came in and attended to him.

The Indian looked very worried and I asked him what was the matter. He hesitated for a moment and then told me that the other four Indians had been talking about taking the gold we had panned and deserting us. He added that so far he had managed to talk them out of it, but that he did not know how much longer he could do so.

We had taken several thousand dollars worth of gold from the bar. In flour bags it lay under Stern's cot. I could see it from where I lay. When Jose had finished, I began to recall all the stories the old-timers down in Chile had told about the treachery of the Peruvian Indians and they were far from comforting.

I was just going to order Jose to help me up when one of the other Indians called him from outside the tent. He went out hurriedly.

I lay and sweated in the tent. My re-

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volver, in its holster, hung from the tent pole about four feet away. I made three attempts to reach it but I could not do so. I was scared, badly scared. I would not have minded if I had had a chance, but to lie there helpless and let a bunch of lousy Indians stick a knife in me was far from appealing.

The hours passed and then about sunset I heard the voices of the Indians coming towards the tent. Suddenly Jose rushed inside and running to my gun grabbed it from its holster and pushed it under the blankets close to my right hand.

Barely had he done so when the other four Indians entered. Each was carrying the ugly long knife that is their one implement. I shouted for them to get out. They paid not the slightest attention to me but headed for Stern's cot under which was the gold.

Jose grabbed one of them, and when the fellow tried to stab him seized his knife arm and the two of them wrestled back and forth.

The other three tumbled the unconscious Stern off his cot and seized the two flour bags. I managed to raise myself a little and grasped the gun under the blankets.

Jose had managed to get his opponent down and was choking him. One of the other Indians raised his knife to stab him. I fired from under the blankets. The heavy bullet hit the man with the knife in the body and threw him sideways.

The other two dropped the bags and came at me. I hit one with my second shot and the third ran for the tent door. I fired again and he fell outside.

The blankets were on fire and when the flames began to bite me I yelled with the pain. Jose released the man he was choking and dragged me off the cot. Everything went out then.

It was daylight again when I came to. Jose was trying to feed me some fish. I looked over and saw that Stern was better. I asked Jose what had happened to the men I had shot. He said two were dead and that the one he had fought with had got away. A groan from outside told me the location of the fourth. I asked Jose how badly the man was hurt and he grunted that he'd be all right pretty soon.

I've never met a whiter man than Jose. For the next six days, until Stern and I were able to get up, he looked after us like a mother.

Two weeks later we started for the nearest town, Exaltacion, taking the fourth Indian, who was then able to travel with us. In Exaltacion we turned him over to the authorities and told our story. What happened to the man I never learned.

When we attempted to get out of the country with our gold we had more trouble, but that is a different story and far from coming under the head of adventure.

Jose was looked after, though, and I'll always remember him as a good Indian.

—Eric M. Stewert

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GUNLOCK RANCH

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

A Novel of Warring Factions on a Mighty Range

GUNLOCK RANCH lay near the desert settlement of Sleepy Cat. Its owner, Gus Van Tambel, was the most thoroughly detested character in all that country, but owner of vast acres to which his daughter Jane was heir. And Jane was a different matter. Her father's foreman, McCrossen, wanted to marry her; Doc Carpy (although he knew a great deal too much about her father) was her confidant and friend; the ranch hands adored her, and Jane loved her country and its inhabitants. But most of all was she interested in Bill Denison, a neighboring rancher. No one at Gunlock could say enough against Bill—rustler, gunman, thief, they called him; and Jane knew her father was trying to oust him from his ranch.

Old Van Tambel had to go to a hospital

Part III

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and while he was away, Jane was in charge—and Dave McCrossen thought *he* was. Forest fires broke out and Denison's ranch was threatened. Jane ordered the Gunlock forces out to fight the fire and McCrossen refused to go—whereat Jane said he was fired, took most of the men and went herself. Upon her father's return, McCrossen was reinstated, and Jane forbidden to have anything to do with Denison—even though Bill saved her life in the fire. Jane hoped for peace on the ranges, but an old timer told her, "There'll be peace there when bob cats go back on jack-rabbits. Not any before."

CHAPTER XXV

JANE TREMBLES

"TOOK a long time to do your figurin'," growled her father when Jane returned to his office.

She was too sick at heart to do anything more than respond perfunctorily. "Bill likes to talk. And he says things so many times over."

Riding home with her father, who rode slowly, she had plenty of time to think. And her thoughts were sober-hued.

McCrossen was a thorn in her side. To meet him every day and be halfway pleasant was a daily strain.

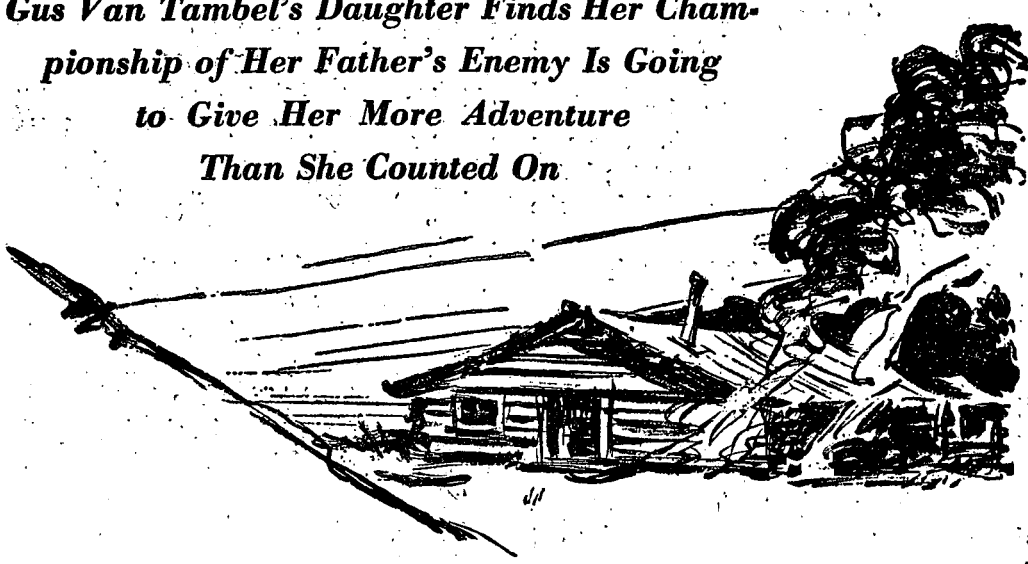
He tried to make up to her. "I got off on the wrong foot with you, Jane," he said one day. The two were standing near the ranch-house door, in the sunshine. "I know that, all right. All I can say is, if there's anything I can do to square myself, I'm ready to do it whenever you say the word. Though I'm foreman here, I don't want to do a thing agin your wishes and I won't if I know it. Is that fair?"

Jane was looking up at the mountains. She answered without rancor; a mild manner must be her cue now and she had no desire to keep up a quarrel.

A week passed. Van Tambel lay in bed. He had to send Jane to Medicine Bend to attend to some bank business there. To keep her under surveillance, Van Tambel ordered McCrossen to ride to Sleepy Cat with her. When Jane heard of the arrangement she flatly refused to go.

"What's 'a' matter with you, you damned cantankerous thing!" demanded her father huskily. "Ain't my foreman good enough for you to ride with?"

Gus Van Tambel's Daughter Finds Her Championship of Her Father's Enemy Is Going to Give Her More Adventure Than She Counted On



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Jane's features set. "I won't ride with him," she declared crisply.

"Why not?" thundered her father, rising up in bed. "Oh!" he exclaimed swearing violently, at a sudden twinge of pain. "Why won't you ride with him, you hussy?"

Jane drew herself up the least bit. Her father's rudeness stiffened her attitude. "If you want to know the real reason, I don't want him trying to kiss me on the way home after he's had too many drinks in the Red Front Saloon. I won't ride with him. If he goes, I don't." She turned on her heel to leave the room.

"Come back here," shouted her father. "You're here to obey my orders——"

"When they don't conflict with my self-respect," retorted the girl defiantly. "You needn't swear or bluster. I won't go with McCrossen and you may take it or leave it."

Van Tambel growled, cursed and protested. It was all one. Finally Bull Page was assigned to escort the wayward Jane and the two set off for town. Jane was most interested to get some news from Bull Page about Denison; but Bull had neither seen nor heard of him since the Gunlock Knob fire.

IN MEDICINE BEND Jane extended a note, drew some money, paid the hospital bills and waited for the afternoon train home. When she got to Sleepy Cat it was ten o'clock at night and no rig was at the station from the ranch. She was compelled to spend the night at the hotel. It was a long time afterward before she realized that the whole trip had been planned by her father and McCrossen for a purpose.

She rose early, breakfasted alone and started out to pay the few remaining fire bills. She went first to Spotts' place to pay for the beer. Spotts was out. "Ought to be back pretty soon," said Oscar, who was shaving a miner. "He's got to be here pretty soon to let the bartender out for breakfast."

"I've an order to leave at Rubido's," said Jane, "I'll be back." She walked over to the general store, left her provision order for the wagon to pick up and returned to Spotts' barber shop. Jake, his crutches at his side, was sitting in his barber chair, reading a newly-arrived copy of the Police *Gazette*. He tucked it quickly out of sight when he saw his visitor.

"Hello, there, Miss! Well! How's things out at Gunlock?"

"About as usual, Jake. I've come to pay for the beer."

"No more fires bothering?"

"Not at present. How much was the beer?"

"No hurry about that."

"Yes, but I want to clean it up. I had no idea they took out so much."

"Much?" echoed Jake in disgust. "Why turn them bums loose on a barrel of free beer and they'd clean up thirty gallons in three minutes. I made the price two and a half a case. The freight is pretty high on that Milwaukee beer."

"That would be how much?"

"Hundred and twenty dollars. But I drank some of that beer myself—take off a dollar for that."

"Not at all. You fought the fire too."

"I guess the fire fought me. Thank you, ma'am," added the saloonkeeper-barber as Jane counted out and handed him his money. "If I could only call my old side pardner back out of it!" Spotts shook his head. "I wouldn't mind if I never got a durned cent for the beer."

"None of us will ever forget Panama, Jake."

"The damnedest, meanest, orneryist fires that ever swept them hills," said Spotts, counting over the money perfunctorily. "Done more damage to the range—not to speak of losing the best man we had in Sleepy Cat and crippling up the best man we had in the hills."

"Who was that, Jake?"

"Why, Bill Denison."

Jane started visibly. "Bill Denison?"

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she echoed in consternation. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know he's in the hospital."

"I know nothing of the kind," exclaimed Jane sharply. She stood white as a sheet. "What has happened, tell me?"

"Why didn't you know his eyes is gone to hell?"

"What do you mean? *What has happened,* tell me?"

SPOTTS started violently out of his torpor as he saw with amazement the effect of his news on his visitor. "Why, Carpy says his eyes got burnt some getting through that Gunlock Knob fire. Then some son——" Jake checked himself. "Somebody set his ranch-house afire last night and nearly burnt him up. Ask Carpy; he'll tell you."

She blanched, faltered, threw back her head, and caught hold of a chair at hand to steady herself. "Burned his ranch-house," she stammered. "Are you sure, Jake?"

"Certain sure. Bob Scott brought Bill in, in a Gunlock wagon 'fore daylight this morning. Bill and Ben Page got close to burnt alive."

"I'll see the doctor," she exclaimed, shaken and confused.

"Sure you're all right to go?"

She drew her hand across her eyes. "Oh! Thank you. I'm all right."

She hurried to the hotel. The doctor was out on a call. The frantic girl asked questions in vain at the desk. Neither the clerk nor the housekeeper had any idea when he would be back. There was something better to do. Jane hurried to McAlpin's barn where she had left her pony and rode straight up the hill to the hospital.

CHAPTER XXVI

SUSPENSE

WHERE is he, Sister?"

"His room is on the second floor —218. Shall I show you the way?"

"If you please, Sister. I learned only a moment ago that he was here. I've heard of this dreadful ranch-house fire only this minute. Did he tell you how it happened, Sister?"

"He has hardly spoken since they brought him in. But Mr. Scott said it was getting out of the burning ranch-house."

"How *could* that have happened? His eyes were scorched in saving me, Sister, from getting burned to death on Gunlock Knob."

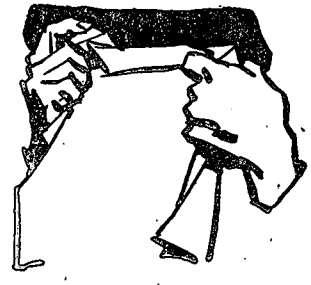
"Oh, my dear."

"You know what terrible fires we've been having down our way——"

"They've been terrible everywhere this fall."

"I was caught in one that came like a hurricane. Do you think there is any chance to save his sight? Oh, Sister, can you imagine how I feel?"

"Dear heart, I do know how you feel. Of course I don't know a thing about the



case, except that Doctor Carpy has given very strict orders about his care." She was too considerate to tell how worried she knew Carpy to be. "Of course his room is dark——"

"Dark?"

"Oh, entirely. He will have to stay in a dark room for some time——"

"How dreadful."

"And his eyes are bandaged. We like Mr. Denison so much—he's always been so kind to us with nice gifts—veal and beef—and every winter he sends us one or more deer; and one year he brought us an elk. He's a great hunter you know. So we all pray he may recover his sight. This is his room." The nurse laid her

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hand on the knob of the door. "Shall I go in with you?"

"Do, Sister," said Jane. But there was a break in her voice; the nurse heard it.

"You must put aside anxiety, dear, and seem cheerful," she whispered. "We must keep him cheered up, you know. That helps recovery."

"Yes, Sister," murmured Jane unsteadily. "He shan't know I'm worried."

Sister opened the door. "Good morning, Mr. Denison."

"Good morning, Sister."

Jane walking in on tiptoe behind her guide, heard his answer.

"Who's that with you, Sister?" Jane had stepped as lightly as possible; but his ears had detected her footsteps.

"I've brought you a visitor. I hope you're not cross," she added banteringly.

"Who is visiting me?" he asked.

Jane had been gradually drawing closer to him. "Bill?"

He started violently. For an instant he was silent—as if listening for more. Then he responded, low and strangely, "Jane?"

"Yes, Bill."

In the dark, her hand touched his arm. He caught both her hands, crushed them within his own and drew one and the other hungrily to his lips. "Sister," he said, composed, yet eager, "can you find a chair, in the dark, for Miss Van Tambel?"

With the nurse gliding out of the room, Jane's hands crept over his shoulders, around his neck and as his arms enfolded her, their lips met to give and to receive that for which words were unneeded.

BUT Jane could not repress for ever. The silent throbbing of her breast betrayed her—and her eyes stung and burned as her cheek lay against his cheek, close to his bandaged eyes. She wanted to speak but feared she could not control her voice.

"I didn't want you to hear that I was in this trouble till we knew more about it. How did you find out I was here, Jane?"

"Jake Spotts, Bill. I never dreamed of such a thing," she said tremulously. "He told me the ranch-house was burned last night. Oh, Bill!"

"I think maybe my eyes will be all right in a couple of days. Ben Page has been working for me for a while. He got hold of Bob Scott to bring me in to see Doc Carpy—and the doctor sent me here." He felt her warm tears against his cheek. He kissed them away from her eyes. "Don't cry! There's nothing to cry over. I'll be all right when my eyes get better. Doctor says that won't be long. I wish you hadn't heard of it."

"I wish you'd never heard of me, Bill. To think of it, that I should have been the cause of starting all this trouble. Oh, why couldn't I have stayed home that dreadful day instead of riding into danger? I'll never, never forgive myself. And I'm ashamed to say it, Bill. But the real reason why I rode up there was because I was just hungry for a sight of you—that was the real reason, Bill."

Denison only laughed. "Don't think you're the only one that was hungry for a sight. If I hadn't been scouting around the Knob trail where I knew you like so much to ride, I'd never have caught sight of you. What then? Why, Jane if you were burning in a fire why shouldn't I jump in after you? What would be left for me?"

"Do your eyes hurt terribly, Bill?"

"Not when you're here, Jane."

"Oh, I know better. I know they do. And I can do nothing to help!"

He made light of her worry. There were more furtive tears, more earnest prayers, more submission from Jane. More happy laughs, more ardent embraces, more carefree cheer from Denison.

"Why, Bill," she protested, at length, "one would think there was nothing the matter with you. And I am frightened to death."

"I was frightened to death myself till you came. It's not much fun sitting alone here in the dark. What frightens me most

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is the thought that if the worst should come, I'd lose you."

"You can never lose me, Bill. Remember that."

"Yes, but a blind man!" he exclaimed desperately. "Jane, I never could ask you to marry me blind——"

"You wouldn't have to, dear. But there wouldn't be any law against my asking a blind man to marry me, would there?"

He shook his head mournfully. "I'd never let that happen—I couldn't."

"Well, if it does happen, you'll never shake me off. I'll hang around you like a sick calf. Don't think you can boss me, Bill Denison. When I set out to marry a man, I marry him. And I know who'll marry me, if you won't."

HE SHOOK his head. "If this thing only turns out right, won't I come a runnin'! But even then, there's your father, Jane——"

"My father was never appointed to pick a husband for me. If you want him to pick a wife for you, you ought to speak to him about it. Oh, Bill! What nonsense I'm talking and my heart just bursting with love for that lone, lanky rancher who's made a poor girl so miserable for the rest of her life. There's only one way to keep me away from that good-for-nothing, Bill Denison—that's to kill me and make me into dust—even then, I'd tremble under his feet. I would—just to annoy him."

Her tongue was light and happy and her lips warm and yielding when she said good-bye; but her heart was dread with fear. She rode straight to Carpy's office; luckily she found him in. He greeted her. "Well, well, well! How's my girl from the hills? You haven't been to see me for ages——"

"Oh, I know, Doctor, but——"

"Just came from out your way—added one more to the population of Placer County this morning. How does it seem at Gunlock with your old man at home?" he asked cutting off with a bluff, every attempt of poor Jane to break in with a question.

"It's quite different, of course——"

"I'll bet it is. He's got McCrossen back."

"Doctor! Please! I'm so worried about Mr. Denison——"

"So am I."

"I came in to ask about him."

"I know you did—that's the reason I've been holding you off."

"You know what happened——"

"Said he got trapped in the ranch-house fire."

"Yes, but it was trying to save my life when his eyes first got hurt."

"Never said a blamed word about that."

"I was up on Gunlock Knob and he rode up to get me through the fire. Doctor," she asked unsteadily, "can't you save his eyes, do you think?"

The old surgeon looked at her sympathetically. "You're asking a hard question, Jane. There are times when a doctor can't tell much better than an outsider, how things are coming out. Bill's in bad shape, I must admit that. But I'm doing everything under the sun I can for him——"

"I'm sure of that, Doctor."

"Why are you sure?"

"Because everybody about this town swears by you——"

"Some of 'em swear at me," suggested Carpy.

"If they ever do, it's because you never will send 'em a bill!"

The doctor was good-naturedly skeptical. "Is that so? Honest?"

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"I couldn't be anything but honest with you, Doctor. You're the salt of the earth. But, oh, I'm so worried. Be honest with me. Will he see again?"

"Jane, my girl, give me another two weeks. If I thought anybody, anywhere, could do anything more than I'm doing, I'd put him on the cars tonight. It's time, Jane; if time doesn't go back on me, I'll pull him through."

HE SAID everything to encourage and divert her, though in his heart he knew that the chances were heavily against his patient. But this was his burden and his responsibility, and he preferred to bear such things alone.

"How long will he have to stay in a dark room, Doctor?"

"Some time yet, Jane. Well, what of that, girl?" he demanded in surprise—tears were welling into her eyes. "That's the least of it."

"Oh, I know; it's not that——"

"What is it?"

She looked at him with clearing eyes but with hesitation, then with appeal. "Speak out, little one—why be afraid?"

"Bill and I are engaged, Doctor."

"Fine. You've got a man, girl—a real man. And he's got a jewel for a sweetheart. When's it going to be?"

"I don't know, Doctor, I wish I did——"

"What does old Van say?"

"He's very bitter, Doctor. He doesn't know we're engaged but he says I shan't ever even speak to Bill again."

"Learn the Gunlock sign language! What does Bill say to all this?"

"Oh, he doesn't know it; I wouldn't tell him for the world."

"He'll find it out for himself sometime."

"That isn't what is worrying me, Doctor——"

"Sensible girl! Don't give a damn for what Van says. If it comes to that, I'll have something to say myself."

"It's Bill, Doctor—he says he will never marry me if he goes——" her voice caught; she couldn't finish.

Carpy scowled. "Oh, hell! More people go crazy trying to cross bridges that they never come to than fill all the boneyards in America. It's for you to say what you'll do, not for Bill Denison to say. If we do lose out, it's for you to say whether you'll marry him—not for him to say whether he'll marry you. And if you don't want to marry him, tell me and I'll tell him—he'll release you."

"But I don't want to be released," protested Jane with filling eyes.

"You might change your mind," intimated Carpy darkly. He was willing to probe a little deeper.

"I never will change my mind!" Jane almost stormed the protest. "I want to marry him, sick or well, seeing or not seeing. I pledged myself to him, and I don't want him, no matter what happens, to cast me off."

"Don't worry, girlie. Bill's no blamed fool. He's only given you a chance to break away, if you wanted to. Maybe an honorable man couldn't do anything else."

CHAPTER XXVII

JANE IS TROUBLED

IF JANE expected to get much information about the Denison fire at home, she was disappointed. When she reported it to her father, he was silent—professing still to feel outraged at her insubordination. McCrossen was more communicative, even sympathetic; but knew little about the fire—only that Scott had asked for and been given a light wagon and team to take Denison to town.

After a painful night, Jane rose early to go again into town. In the yard she encountered McCrossen.

"Riding out?" he asked.

"I am."

"I'll saddle up for you."

"Have the horses been fed?"

"Yes."

"I'll saddle up myself."

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"Your father rode over to the pastures with Page this morning," volunteered McCrossen, walking alongside Jane. She made no answer; indeed, she rather quickened her pace. Her companion stepped up his own.

"Your father left word I was to ride out with you, if you went off the ranch."

"I don't need anybody to ride out with me."

"Well, don't get me wrong again—I'm only telling you what he said."

McCrossen opened the corral gate. Jane, without any comment, walked in after her horse. He tried to help but she ignored his efforts. "Well," he laughed, "it's too bad I got in wrong with you. But Denison and I have had differences you know nothing about. I guess I'd done better to send over help when you asked me to. But I was steamed up a little that morning and if you want to know the truth——"

"I don't care to——"

"Well, don't get so high and mighty about it—I was sore about you taking so much interest in Bill's affairs, anyhow. I got off on the wrong foot right on the start with you—so I'm kind of raw on seeing you set for somebody else. Let me tighten that cinch, anyway. This roan always swells up when he's cinching. Now I don't care a rap what the old man says. I'll ride out with you if you want me. If you don't say so."

"I don't."

"O.K."

Jane undertook to mount.

"Look here," said McCrossen suddenly. "Why don't you like me?" Without further preface than a laugh he caught her in his arms. "I'll do anything to please you——"

Jane, struggling angrily, stood pinned. He laughed immoderately at her efforts to tear herself away. She rained blows on him with her fists. "Let me go!" she panted. "I hate you."

Still laughing, he tried to talk down her anger. She got away from him. "Hate me as much as you like, Janie, but I'm going to have you. I'll kill any man that tries to take you away from me," he continued coolly. "I don't care a damn who he is—just remember that. And I'd kill you, too, if you married another man."

Panting, and furious with anger and fear she got into her hand the riding whip dangling from her wrist and lashed him across the face and head.

He laughed as he dodged her blows, but he was humiliated and angry. "Ride away, girl," he said. "You're mad, now. But you'll get over that. And remember what I said—I meant it!"

"I'll remember you. And remember what I say! I'd never marry you if you were the last man on earth. I hate you! Get away from my horse!"

As she dashed away, McCrossen drew paper and tobacco from his pocket, rolled a cigarette, and licked the paper's edge as he looked after Jane riding toward Denison's ranch, struck a match, lighted up and started for the bunkhouse.

Jane, her heart beating tumultuously, galloped swiftly along the trail, completely upset. Instead of heading first for town she rode over to Denison's ranch.

THE sight of the ranch-house ruins was a shock, even though she had tried to steel herself against it. A man down near the corral was leading one of Denison's horses to the barn.

"Are you Ben Page?" asked Jane abruptly.

"Yes'm."

"Haven't I seen you over at our ranch?"

"Guess you have."

"You used to work for father——"

"Used to—Yes." His manner was glum. She looked at the house ruins. "How did this happen, Ben?" she asked sympathetically.

"You tell," he returned sullenly.

"Tell me all about it, Ben. I'm from Gunlock and a friend of Bill Denison's."

He regarded her with suspicion. "Must

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be the only one he's got over there," he growled.

Jane swallowed. "I hope it isn't as bad as that," she exclaimed. "What caused this dreadful fire, Ben?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Don't know what caused the fire, eh? Well you ought to at least know how to be civil to a lady. Since you don't, I advise you to come over and take a lesson from your brother. I myself don't know just why you should be so insolent. It's not because you're good-looking I can tell you. You wouldn't take a prize in a beauty-show." With this shot, and leaving the rude cowman staring after her, Jane galloped swiftly away, more than ever upset mentally. She took the Reservation road direct for Sleepy Cat, trying to collect her confused thoughts as she rode. Once in town she sought Doctor Carpy.

She encountered him in the street. They walked together back to his office.

"How are you, Jane?" asked the doctor.

"I just rode in from Bill's. He has Ben Page there, looking after things and the insolent blockhead wouldn't even answer me civilly when I tried to find out how it happened—so I rode away into town."

"That fire has stirred Bill up terribly—out of all proportion to its importance. It maybe was done to annoy him."

JANE looked frightened. "Why, Doctor! What do you mean? Do you believe the ranch-house was set on fire?"

Carpy was taken aback. He had said more than he meant to. "Why, no one can tell for sure about that, of course. Some drunken Indian might have set it afire," continued the doctor, improvising manfully.

"To annoy Bill?" asked Jane incredulously.

"You can't tell," persisted the doctor, gathering courage as he proceeded. "Bill may have made one of 'em mad sometime—ordered him off the place or something. You know the Reservation road runs not far from the ranch-house. Bill told me once himself the bootleggers used to meet the bucks close to his ranch, till the deputy marshal cleaned 'em out."

"How is he coming on, Doctor?"

"All right, so far. It'll take time to tell the story, Jane, just's I said."

"Could I see him this morning, do you think?

"If it was anybody else on earth, the answer would be *no*. If you go over, don't stay long and tell Sister Virginia it's O.K. with me." He looked at his watch. "Now to make sure you don't stay long, be back here at twelve to take lunch with me—promise?"

"I promise."

"And remember," Carpy raised the forefinger of his right hand—"mum's the word."

The utter absence of authentic details concerning the cause of the fire called for

a more active effort on the part of the imagination; and this in turn indicated its stimulation at the bar. So the old-guard were gathered on this morning still discussing the "outrage."

Among those grouped at the inner end of Spotts' long bar were those veterans of the frontier, Henry Sawdy, calm, portly and pulling reflectively at his long-horned mustachios while he fretted his stomach to a keener call for relief by fingering his well-filled glass without raising it to his lips. John LeFever, likewise full-bodied as old port, whistling "soto vokey" as Sawdy described it, twirled his glass and listened for the next fire theory offered by

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Jim McAlpin, the thin, nervous, weather-beaten liveryman.

Toward this trio there now sauntered, coming in the front door, the raw-boned, lantern-jawed, unshaven Bill Pardaloe—Pardaloe of the keen, deep-set, suspicious eyes, lanky and hungry. "Heard any more about it, boys?"

"Sure," taunted John LeFever, "the duly constituted authorities are always the last to get the news."

"You go to hell, John."

"What you going to have, Bill?"

"You buying, John?"

"I am. You'll need all your money for a shave. Speak up; don't keep Oscar standing here waiting—don't you see the bar's full up forward?" Oscar was serving at the bar; there was more money that morning in setting out the bottles than there was in stropping the razors.

Pardaloe rubbed the stubble on his chin thoughtfully and looked sad. "I don't believe I want anything this early, boys. My stomach ain't just right."

"That's what you always say before you order. Speak up, man, and be done with it," insisted LeFever.

"Oscar, my stomach ain't exactly right," persisted Pardaloe, appealing to the bartender, "What do you say?"

"Try a rye this morning, with a squirt of bitters, Bill."

"Set it out. What's the last news, boys?" he asked in a general appeal.

"Just like the first, and that's nothing at all," sputtered McAlpin. "Give me the same, Oscar, with more bitters. Hold on, boys, by the Lord if I'm alive, there comes Ben Page now."

"Hey! Ben! This way," cried Sawdy as the stumpy bowlegged cowman walked down the barroom towards them. "Come along and wet up."

"No, boys! I'm off that stuff for life."

"Then what are you doing in here?"

"I knew this is where I'd find the loafers."

"Well, you've found 'em. Now take your dose or get out."

"I paid my share of the national debt before you were born, Sawdy."

"Well, I'm paying my share right along yet. What's it going to be?"

"Bourbon, Oscar," growled Page setting his foot on the rail.

"Straight?"

"Did I ever take it any other way?" he snapped.

Without retort, Oscar set out the black bottle and Page, pouring out a glass of whisky that would have staggered a bull moose, made himself one of the party.

"Well, Ben," demanded Sawdy, when the glasses were set down, "what about the fire?"

"I jumped through the window."

Neither questions nor alcoholic stimulation could draw out more definite information than this. As to the origin of the blaze, Page had no theory or knowledge. Sawdy felt his money spent in vain.

The longer the group tarried at the bar, the more resentful they grew at the thought of Bill Denison's being burned out. It was at last decided to let Sawdy and Pardaloe ride to Denison's together to make an "official investigation." They took the Reservation trail and half way out met Bob Scott riding into town.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SAWDY PLOTS

THE two adventurers halted Bob, explained their errand and asked him to join them.

"Boys, I'd do it in a minute but I'm riding in for Doctor Carpy."

"We'll ride back with you just as soon as we look Bill's place over. Come along, Bob. There's dirty work in this. You're the best tracker we got, Bob——"

"I'm no tracker at all——"

"Bob, you're riding with us," growled Pardaloe. "Didn't I let you take an Injun out of jail once?"

"His sentence was up, Bill."

"Yes, but wa'n't there more papers out on that boy? Wa'n't the depity marshal

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there that night five minutes after you whisked him out less'n one minute past twelve o'clock—say!" Pardaloe was pointing his bony finger accusingly at Scott and while the latter grinned amiably, drove the words hard at him.

Scott admitted the violent impeachment but pleaded urgency at the moment. "There's a woman up by the schoolhouse will need a doctor, before he can get there."

"Then he'll be too late," declared Sawdy positively.

"And look here, Bob," intervened Pardaloe, boring in again, "I'll ask you just one question. Did I, or didn't I, turn my back that night in the office while you set my jail clock five minutes ahead?"

Scott wheeled his horse around, "Come along then, let's get this thing over quick." The three galloped for Denison's ranch.

THAT night, late, Sawdy, LeFever, McAlpin, Pardaloe and Ben Page met by the dim light of a lantern in the stuffy, smelling harness room of McAlpin's barn.

"Boys," began Sawdy, gravely, when the doors were carefully shut and outer approaches examined. "It's just's we figured—dirty work out at Bill's ranch. It was lucky Pardaloe and I picked up Bob Scott. He's magic on trailin'. If it hadn't been for Bob, Pardaloe and me'd been scratching around Bill's place yet. There wasn't a thing to show where or how the fire started—the job was too well done. But what couldn't be covered up was the ground sign in the yard. Who'd been there last? Lucky for us, there wasn't many horses 'd been running around the yard. Bob spotted three; one was Music, Bill's horse—Ben's been riding her. The other two were Gunlock horses, boys. One that Jane rides—that was fresh track. But there was older track—of a Gunlock horse.

"Gunlock horse?" echoed LeFever.

In the murky light of the lantern Sawdy pulled his mustachios deliberately. "A Gunlock horse," he repeated. "And it was the sorrel gelding that most of you've seen. Bob knows every horse in the hills by his hoofs and as luck would have it, the sorrel, he himself traded to McCrossen about a year ago—so he was dead sure of them hoofs. McCrossen used to ride it but he give it up. Then Bull Page rode it—why, you've seen it at the hitch rack at Rubido's a hundred times ain't you?"

A chorus answered aye.

"That horse was over to Bill's place maybe thirty-six to forty-eight hours before Scott read the sign. The man that rode that horse over to Denison's night before last knows a lot about who started that fire. Who rode it?"

The question was purely for rhetorical effect. It was so understood by those to whom it was put. And having observed the usual rhetorical pause, Sawdy resumed.

"That horse, boys, has been rode by Barney Rebstock since he's roosted over at Gunlock with his old pal and boss, Gus Van Tambel. After Bob fixed on the sorrel, Pardaloe sends him up around by Gunlock to scout the question, who rides the sorrel. Then Pardaloe and I rode straight back to town to send out Carpy. You see, Bob could appear up at Gunlock casual-like and ask questions and nobody would think anything about it. Bob rides in and out there often.

"Of course, he had to be careful. But there's two honest men over there, Bull Page and the Chink. Bob set down in the kitchen for a cup of coffee—hadn't had no breakfast—and buzzes the Chink. Finally he comes around to the sorrel he'd traded in to the ranch, and asks who rides it now. 'Lebstock,' says the Chink.

"Then Bob waits for Bull Page. He asks Bull whether he thinks there's any chance to get McCrossen to trade the sorrel back to him. Finally, he asks Bull who's ridin' the sorrel. Bull says since Barney Rebstock come back, he asked McCrossen if he could fasten on to the sorrel and McCrossen said, yes."

SAWDY paused again. There was a general silence.

"That's the story, boys. No, hold on!

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Barney and Van Tambel left the ranch at daylight this morning for the pastures, with Barney on the sorrel!"

"Story enough," grunted McAlpin. "But," he continued, "Barney's pretty cute. If he was going to start a fire, wouldn't he take somebody else's horse?"

"I thought that way for a while," intervened Pardaloe. "But Barney can be careless, too—you know that, boys. So I asked Bob to find out, was Barney out that night of the fire; was the sorrel out? Old Bull is a nighthawk around Gunlock, you know that. He may have suspected what was in Bob's mind, but he wouldn't give a whoop anyway. He hates Barney like poison. He told Bob that Barney was the only man outside the bunkhouse that night. And he heard him riding away."

"What more do you want?" growled Ben Page. "I had to jump out the window."

"Didn't you see nor hear anybody?" asked LeFever sharply.

"Hell, no! Do you suppose a fire bug would stand around till the place burned down?"

Sawdy stopped the general discussion. "Boys, what you goin' to do?"

Pardaloe rose. Some experience in frontier courts of this kind had convinced him that it was time for a sheriff or an ex-sheriff to be moving on. As a one-time representative of the law laid down in statute books, he felt it incumbent on himself to take no further part in the deliberations. "Guess I'll be pulling out, boys. If you'll tell me what kind of mattresses you're used to, I'll try to have 'em ready for you by the time you land in jail."

"Run along, Bill," nodded Sawdy. "We'll see you later—maybe."

WITH the ex-sheriff gone, Sawdy called for opinion as to what, if any, action should be taken.

"If any!" exclaimed McAlpin echoing the words scornfully. "Man alive, you know it ain't a question of if any action. It's a question of what kind of action."

"Got a rope here, McAlpin?"

"Got 'em big and little, old and new——"

"Don't be too hard on Barney," interposed LeFever. "The least you can do is to soap the rope for him."

"Don't misunderstand me, boys," interposed Sawdy, "I want to string him up and down a few times to get the story out of him. A little argument like that'll bring it. I want to know whether this was his job, or was he put up to it? That's principally what I want to know. Who's in on this ride?"

Every man's hand went up. "McAlpin, we'll cut you out—don't need you. Just look you give us a rope they can't identify.

The three of us will work this out. Ben you ride back to the ranch, just's if nothing'd happened. Got any gunny-sacking in the barn?"

"Plenty."

"Make shoes for five horses. We'll leave them there and ride over bareback to Gunlock, snake Barney through the window where he sleeps in the bunkhouse and take him along."

"What do you want the fifth horse for?" asked Page.

"Bob Scott'll be with us, that's all settled. He'll have a Gunlock buck over at the ranch, off an' on, till we get Barney marked down right—find out where he sleeps and so on. The Gunlock boy will give all this to Bob and he'll give it to us. That'll be about all tonight. Scatter. If I've got any friends left in this world they'll meet me in about ten minutes at Spotts'—what say?"

McAlpin raised his hand. "Stop!"

"Well," exclaimed Sawdy gruffly. "What's 'a matter with you, Hop Scotch?

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Tryin' to collect some more rent from somebody? I know I don't owe you any."

"First time in two years if you don't. But I don't think so much of that bunkhouse stuff; I'm afraid it won't work. Barney is spry as a bobcat. You'll never get him through a window unless you slug him. And before that happens he'll yell so's to start up the whole house."

"All right, figure out a better plan or shut up," suggested Sawdy amicably.

"My idea is to wait till the first night we can catch Barney in town in the Red Front Saloon."

"Wait all summer?"

"You won't have to wait a week. If he set the fire, he's got money 'a plenty. It's burning holes in his pockets. Catch your cat in the saloon; call him out the back door; set him on a horse and ride him down to the bridge—that's gentlemanly and private."

"It's the first time in your life, but I guess you are right, McAlpin," admitted Sawdy. "We've just got to set the rope watch on Barney. I'll watch tomorrow night; John Wednesday night and Thursday night——"

"What the hell! Two nights running?" protested LeFever. "I guess not. Why Thursday night is lodge night, Man!"

"Look here, John," said Sawdy. "I'll ask you a question. When did you go to lodge last?"

"About six years ago."

"Regular member, ain't you?"

"Well, that's the reason I'm going Thursday night—I want to keep in good standing. The Grand Buffalo's going to vaccinate the calves Thursday night. I want to tell you, it's a show."

"Maybe we could get Barney to join your lodge," suggested Sawdy ironically. "That would make it easy."

"Well," exclaimed LeFever with emphatic contempt, "you've got a high opinion of our boys! Maybe you better find out first whether you can get our lodge to join Barney."

"Boys," said Sawdy, rising, "the air in this room is burning my throat plumb up. Let's go."

TEN minutes later found the worthies concerned—except McAlpin, detained at the barn—lined up at Jake Spotts' Bar, leisurely reducing in their humble way the national debt.

Jake, still on crutches, was hobbling around.

"How's the leg, Jake?" asked Sawdy to be polite.

"By rights I ought to be in bed, but I can't afford it."

"Have you seen Barney Rebstock this evening?" asked LeFever casually.

Spotts' face darkened—he, too, hated Barney. "I ain't seen him, and don't ask nothin' like that to make me swear. Boys," he added, addressing the group, "you know Panama spent a whole year trying to break me of my bad habit of swearing. Panama said it was blaspheemy. Now, when it's too late for him to know, I'm going to quit swearing. I give public notice, here and now, if any damned man gets me so angry I've got to swear, I'm not going to cuss him out, like I used to. No! I'm just going to lick hell out of him, then and there so you fellows can tell the boys what to expect."

At that moment the back screen-door banged on its hinges and McAlpin, sharp-faced, keen-eyed and out of breath, rushed into the room. With much celerity and many pantomimic gestures, the Scotchman drew Sawdy far into an empty corner of the saloon. "What's up, Scotty?"

"He's in there," whispered McAlpin. "He's in there right now!"

"Who?"

"Barney!"

"Where?"

"In Boland's saloon! I seen the sorrel standing at the hitchrack in front when I come along up street to join you here, so I went in. Hurry, he's there!"

Sawdy pulled a moment at his mustache. "No hurry," he said reflectively. "It's early yet for him. If he's our man he's got

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a pocket full of money to blow." He thought a minute further. "Look here, Scotch! Tell our boys over there at the bar to string out quiet and meet back of the barn. Watch your chance. Sneak around to the hitchrack and get the sorrel down to the barn on an old feed bill claim. I'll tackle Barney in the saloon and see what chance there is of getting him down there. Got a rope ready?"

"I have."

"Vamos!"

McAlpin joined the men at the bar. Sawdy slipped out the back door, and half a block down the alley walked out into River Street and down to the Red Front Saloon.

BUT from the moment the big adventurer stepped out of the back door of one saloon and in at the front door of the other, a curious change took place. He had left Spotts' place sober—Sawdy was in fact a very moderate man. He strode into the Red Front reeling.

The bar was well filled. Sawdy saw at a glance that among the men lined up there were a number of town loafers who never drank except at somebody's expense. Boland favored their loafing in the place because when a sport did appear, ready to treat the house, numbers swelled the bill. When Sawdy caught sight of Rebstock with the loafers around him, inference was swift and correct. Barney had money.

The saloonkeeper, Harry Boland, foxy-eyed, and alert at the head of the bar, saw Sawdy stagger in through the green baize; he watched the big fellow closely. Sawdy zigzagged back towards the loafers among whom Barney was holding forth.

Boland, a man of ripe experience in appraising all stages of intoxication was suspicious, since Henry Sawdy was no drunk. Boland had never before seen him intoxicated. But Sawdy was an artist and did not make the mistake of the actor who plays the sober man trying to appear drunk. Sawdy was the drunken man trying to appear sober.

He greeted Barney gravely, then ordered drinks for everybody in Barney Rebstock's honor. Having lingered over the round, Sawdy cast his eye approvingly upon the thirsty crowd, passed the forefinger of his right hand thoughtfully under each wing of his mustache in turn, drew from a vest pocket a gold double eagle and made a general proposal.

"I'll match any man here for twenty-dollar gold pieces." It was a fairly safe offer because he well knew all the loafers put together could not raise twenty dollars. But he had an object in view.

Barney, after some shilly-shallying, accepted the challenge. He asked Boland to lend him a gold piece. The saloonkeeper objected. Barney grew loud and insisted, with some pounding on the bar, and some strong language, that Boland produce. It pleased the thief to show a brief authority before his cronies, at a bar where ordinarily his credit would not be good for a glass of beer. When Boland reluctantly produced a twenty dollar coin and tossed it out to Barney, it did not take Sawdy long to figure out that Barney had money and that it was in the keeping of the saloonkeeper. Sawdy, notoriously lucky at matching, lost out after several trials; he quit forty dollars to the bad. But he had Barney greatly inflated by his triumph, with the whole room crowding eagerly around the contestants.

After a round of drinks at Barney's charge, Sawdy brought the talk around to a fine-looking sorrel outside at the hitchrack. Barney claimed it. Sawdy wanted to buy it. Barney demurred—it wasn't for sale.

Boland heard the talk. He drew Barney to the rear end of the bar, "Sell it to him, you fool," whispered Boland. "Don't you see he's drunk as a fiddler? You can get twice what the horse is worth."

Thus encouraged, Barney stepped out of doors with Sawdy, followed by a little circle of the curious.

The horse was gone. This fact caused no great excitement; Sawdy suggested he

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had got loose and strayed up or down street and that they take a look around to find him. The curiosity of the crowd weakened and they re-entered the saloon, hoping for another chance to get a drink. Sawdy and Barney walked down street together, wrangling as they went over the mischance and the merits of the missing horse. As the pair passed McAlpin's barn it occurred to Sawdy they had better look in and ask for information.

Chapter XXIX

THE BOX STALL

A HANGING lantern lighted the barn gangway dimly. The office was dark. Sawdy's call for a hostler was answered, after some shouting and delay, by McAlpin himself, who, lantern in hand, ambled in his peculiar gait briskly forward.

"Hello, Mac," exclaimed Sawdy waving like a tall tree in a number four breeze. "We're looking for Barney's horse," he continued gruffly. "Got loose upstreet just now—seen anything of a stray?"

McAlpin, raising his lantern, looked at Rebstock. He peered at him with his usual air of suspicion. "What kind of a horse?" he asked.

"A four-legged horse," growled Rebstock. He recollected vaguely something about a very old and equally delinquent feed bill of which McAlpin had reminded him for some years, even before he went to the penitentiary.

The Scotch liveryman took from Barney's insolent remark just the cue he wanted.

"Why you ornery thieving jailbird," he sputtered, setting down his lantern. "Keep a civil tongue in your head or I'll pitch you into the street."

Sawdy intervened. "Easy, Mac. Barney means no harm. We been celebrating a little, I'm trying to help Barney find his horse—that's all. It's a sorrel horse, Mac, that he got from McCrossen out at Gunlock—you know. Seen anything of a stray tonight?"

McAlpin had picked up his lantern, thus signifying that immediate hostilities were no longer contemplated. "Why yes, I seen a stray," he admitted sulkily.

"Was it a sorrel?" asked Sawdy with some hope.

"It was a sorrel, Sawdy; saddled and bridled. What about it?"

"It's probably Barney's horse. Let's see it. Where is it?"

McAlpin jerked his head back over his shoulder. "In the box stall. Your horse, Barney?"

"Sure, it's my horse."

"I'm glad o' that," remarked McAlpin cryptically.

"I'll go get it," suggested Barney.

McAlpin set down his lantern. "Easy, Barney. You'll get the horse when you pay me that nine-dollar feed bill you've owed me seven year, now."

A wrangle followed. McAlpin saw no reason, in the happy circumstances, for not collecting his just dues. Barney flew into a rage. He denounced the Scotchman, as a money shark and a crook.

McAlpin bowed with a smile, but his lantern remained on the floor. "That all may be, Mr. Rebstock. That all may be," he conceded meekly, "I probably am a shark 'n' a crook; maybe I beat my wife. I don't deny it, Mr. Rebstock. But I want that nine dollars you owe me seven year for feed and stabling—or hell, Mr. Rebstock, will freeze over plenty hard afore you take your sorrel horse away from this little barn."

THE wrangle continued, but Sawdy at length persuaded Barney to pay the disputed feed bill. "Now," said Rebstock insolently, as McAlpin handed him his change from one of Sawdy's lost gold pieces, "Where's my horse?"

"Right this way, Barney," returned McAlpin in as good humor as if Barney were his best friend. "Put out your cigars, boys, and come along with me," he added, lantern in hand. He scuttled down the gang-

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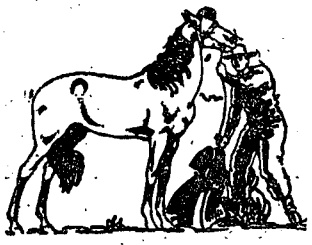
way, Rebstock and Sawdy after him, stopped at the stall box, hung his lantern on a high gangway hook, unlatched the stall door and pointed within. "There's your horse, Barney. Maybe I better give him a bit of oats before you go. No? Water then? What?"

Rebstock and Sawdy had stepped into the stall with McAlpin. The liveryman led the horse out. Rebstock started to follow; Sawdy laid his hand on his shoulder. "Just a minute. I want to talk to you, Barney. We'll join you in a minute, Mac. Get out the black bottle. But leave the lantern."

"What's up?" asked Rebstock, eyeing Sawdy closely, and always suspicious.

Sawdy was standing backed against one side of the box-stall. "Barney," he said in



a confidential fashion, as he threw his elbows back over the stall siding behind him and hooked his thumbs in the lower pockets of his fancy calfskin waistcoat, "I'd like to have just a little horse to horse talk with you."

"What d'you mean, horse to horse talk?" snapped Barney.

"Just this; do you feel just exactly right, leaving your money with Harry Boland?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you feel safe? I ask you as man to man, Barney, and an old friend, do you feel safe, leaving a roll with Boland?"

Barney fumbled mentally. "Why shouldn't I?" he countered bluntly.

"Well, you and I's old friends," declared Sawdy.

"Maybe."

"Most of the time anyway, Barney, and you know I never bore no man a grudge, Barney. You know that?"

BARNEY grunted.

"I'd hate to see you after this trouble you've had, lose your money with Harry Boland," persisted the cowman. "I'll tell you honest—and you can tell the critter himself if you like—I wouldn't never leave five hundred of my money with Harry Boland."

"Never had it to leave, did you?"

"Well, no foolin', Barney, I wouldn't do it."

"Well, I ain't done it."

"Your folks used to live out this way, didn't they, Barney? Wa'n't your uncle, Old John Rebstock from up in Williams Cache? I used to know John well. Used to see you riding in and out of the Cache when you was a kid. So that's what I say, as man to man—keep your money in the bank, not in a dive. Have you got a receipt for your money?"

"No."

"How much money are you leaving with him?"

"None of your damned business, that's how much. I'm headin' up street. Get out of the way."

"Don't get sore, Barney. I'm meaning the best for the nephew of an old friend. Just wait a minute and I'll walk upstreet with you—getting kind of thirsty myself. Did you hear, Barney, about Bill Denison's place getting burnt down?"

"I heard about a fire out that way—what about it?" demanded Rebstock.

"Why nothing—nothing at all. But Barney, this is why I wanted to talk to you. There's folks here in town that don't know you as well as I do, are mean enough to say you know a lot more about that fire than you want to tell. I claim they're wrong—what shall I tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em to go to hell."

"Suppose they won't do it, Barney?" asked Sawdy calmly.

Rebstock shuffled angrily. "Look here, Sawdy. You can't bunk me any more. If they don't want to go to hell, you go for 'em."

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With this suggestion, Rebstock started again for the stall door. Sawdy's hand came down a bit heavier on Barney's shoulder. The slippery fellow tried to jerk away when Sawdy's fingers sank deep into the coat and shirt of his victim. "Barney," he protested solemnly, "I don't like to see an old friendship broken up by thoughtless words."

"A hell of a friendship," snorted Rebstock.

"Barney, I want to be friends with you. What's the facts about that fire?"

WITH a volley of oaths, Rebstock tore loose from Sawdy's grasp, backed hurriedly away and tried to spring over the side wall. Sawdy was too quick. He jumped to him, caught him by the arm, and slammed him half way across the stall. Barney landed on his hands and knees, sprang to his feet and faced his old-time acquaintance with wicked eyes. In the dim light of the lantern, high in the gangway, Sawdy caught the flash of the blade of a knife—lying, Mexican fashion, in Barney's right hand.

That looked like life or death. Sawdy had no wish to be slit up his front like a porker. The two faced each other warily.

Both were quick. Rebstock, smaller and lighter, could strike and spring like a wildcat, but he faced a foe, who, though larger and heavier was esteemed among his fellows, hard to corner. Sawdy held the door-side of the stall with his back to the light. He could see Rebstock's eyes flashing green. Rebstock wanted to get close enough to Sawdy to cut him and jump through the door; but he feared the terrific grip of the cowman's fingers on his wrists before he should get the knife into play.

Sawdy carried his gun—Rebstock had left his own with Boland—but he disdained to use it on a partly unarmed man. It was no part of his program to get himself embroiled with the law by shooting the criminal; what he and his cronies wanted from Rebstock was information. But now, as the price of securing it, he stood in danger of getting ripped open by a mean-looking knife.

It took only an instant for Sawdy to perceive that he could not safely hold his stand in front of the stall door. The lantern light was too uncertain—he could not follow Rebstock's eyes—part of the time he could hardly follow his jumpy steps. The outlaw was extremely swift in movement and dangerously agile. Sawdy was obliged to bring all his own resources into play to hold him at bay.

IN A moment, both men, one big, the other small, were jumping about the stall like boxers stripped for the ring. But Sawdy, though big, was the fastest on his feet among the cowmen that rode the Gunlock ranges. He had little alcohol aboard, was naturally as quick as a flash, and knew he was facing the most dangerous man with a knife, along the Spanish Sinks. Ten youthful years spent among Mexican bandits, together with a lean and jumpy physical makeup, had given Barney Rebstock the name of a mean man with a knife, and Sawdy had no intention of adding to the outlaw's reputation as a killer, if he could help it. And he realized he was much safer from the reach of Barney's long arm and supple wrist while springing about on his feet than in merely planting himself in front of the gate.

Feinting and dodging like a pair of wrestlers, the one watching for his chance to jump in with a swift and deadly blow, the other alert for his life and waiting a chance to grip the slippery wrist of his murderous opponent, the two men, springing about the stall, stamped the straw underfoot into bits.

The fight was in the lap of the gods. A misstep, or footslip, might end it any second. Sawdy was hoping his comrades secreted out in the corral would hear the scuffle and come in. But he was just stubborn enough not to call for help.

Barney, enraged at his plight, was breathing hard and wind was too precious

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to waste in words. The silent struggle for the one slight advantage that would end the fight—went on to the music of jerky breaths and nimble footing. It was soon a question as to whose wind would give out first—Sawdy heavier, was at a disadvantage in endurance. While they feinted and jumped about, his foot slipped.

Barney saw the opening. He lunged forward. Sawdy instinctively whirled sidewise and threw up his knee to save his stomach. The savage thrust of Barney's knife caught the calf of his leg. As the cowman went down, his fingers gripped Barney's wrist. With a mere twist of the deadly grip learned long ago in Pan Handle knife fights, he snapped like matches the two bones of Barney's forearm.

The wiry outlaw screamed. He was done; and his knife was left sticking through the calf of his victim's leg. Sawdy's free hand closed over his foe's throat; the rear gangway doors were flung open and the confederates came running in from the corral.

From the darkness of the box stall came only the swish of hard breathing and the oaths and cries of Barney. LeFever grasped the bail of the lantern and threw the light rays within.

"Henry!" he yelled in alarm. "What's 'a' matter, pard? What's wrong?" He unlatched the gate of the stall as he called and hastened inside with Scott and Page at his heels. McAlpin ran down from the office. It was a moment before LeFever could make out just what was happening on the floor, as Barney, half-choked, writhed under the remorseless grip that closed his windpipe. Sawdy spread out on his stomach, lay, a huge bulk, with one arm over his antagonist. Only his heavy breathing indicated life. "Henry!" exclaimed LeFever, "What the hell's happened?"

"Nothing's happened yet, John. Look at my leg. Where's his knife?"

"God 'a Mighty! It's in your leg, Henry."

LeFEVER started to draw it out. "Hold on, John! Don't touch that till you get a turnakay on. Who's here?" His heavy blood-shot eyes turned on Scott. "Bob! Look see whether he's slit an artery or a vein. Hold the lantern there, John."

Scott found blood spurting from the blade of the knife. He fashioned a tourniquet from a thong of rawhide.

"Get up and get Carpy, quick!" muttered McAlpin to Page. "What you moonin' about. Henry is bad cut. Run, Ben!"

"All right. You hold Barney," growled Page, turning over his writhing prisoner.

Turning to the prostrate cowman while Scott twisted the tourniquet, McAlpin, gripping Rebstock, gave orders to Sawdy; the liveryman always took the stage. "Henry!" he shouted, in his excitement. "Lay right where you are. Don't stir till Carpy comes. Why didn't you call for help?" he thundered at Sawdy.

"Ain't never learned how yet," retorted the wounded man majestically. "I'll take a lesson sometime from you, McAlpin."

"You go to hell. Why didn't you use your gun on him?" demanded McAlpin

nettled. Sawdy drew his revolver from its holster and handed it up for the liveryman to put away for him.

"I'd hate to use a gun on a centipede—he wasn't armed either—except for his butcher knife."

"A poor reason!" snorted McAlpin.

"Well, if that doesn't suit you, I've got a better one."

"What is it?"

"Dead men don't talk."

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CHAPTER XXX

AT THE HOSPITAL

WHEN Carpy reached the box-stall ten minutes later, Sawdy lay on his back, stretched full length on the straw and in size and feature, Henry was a fairly formidable figure.

The doctor held up the lantern. "Hell's bells!" he exclaimed to McAlpin and the hostler. "Don't leave the man lying in this dirt. Henry," he knelt at Sawdy's head, "what have they been doing? Who stuck you?"

"Doc," declared the notorious bachelor, "you might say I stuck myself. Sew me up and send the bill to my father-in-law after I get married, will you?"

"I wouldn't want to impose like that on a decent father-in-law, Henry; it'll be bad enough for any man to have you hitched into his family. Lift him out of here, boys—give me a hand.

"We've got to get him up to the office. Why didn't you twist the tourniquet a little tighter, McAlpin—then you'd have cut his leg clean off. All right—lift! What's that noise out in the corral?"

"Nothing at all," blustered McAlpin, struggling along the gangway with Sawdy's feet. "Just a few bucks from the Reservation, initiating Barney Rebstock into the tribe. Henry, you're heavier than a ton of bricks. I can't hold on much longer."

"Where's my gun?" demanded Sawdy. "If you drop me Mac, I'll drop you!"

Not until the doctor had nearly finished dressing the cowman's leg did the wounded man begin to tell the story. And he had hardly been made ready to send to the hospital when John LeFever and Bob Scott appeared at the office door with Barney Rebstock, white and scared.

"What's 'a' matter with the rest of you?" exclaimed Carpy testily, as he eyed the three.

"Why, Barney," explained LeFever blandly, "fell off his horse a few minutes ago and broke his wrist. Fix him up, will you, Doc? He's got two hundred dollars with Harry Boland—will it cost that much?"

"It would if I could ever get a chance to saw a leg off you, John. I'm sending Henry to the hospital in the old wagon. Just as well dump you in along with him, Barney. I'll tend to you up there."

LeFever raised a hand in alarm. "Hold on, Doc, hold on. Not both of 'em in the same coffin—please! They'd tear their way right out through the planks!"

Sawdy rose up half-way in stronger protest. "Doc," he exclaimed indignantly, "I'm willing to die. But I don't propose to ride to my own funeral with a——!"

"Neither do I," squeaked Barney hotly. "I've got money. I'll pay for my own wagon 'n' ride to the hospital alone. I don't want no company like Bowlegs!"

WHAT the devil was this cutting and squawking all about?" asked Carpy of LeFever later that night.

The two were seated in the doctor's office about midnight. "Doc," explained LeFever, "the boys are pretty sore about Bill Denison's ranch-house getting burnt down. The day *after* the fire Barney Rebstock left two hundred with Harry Boland—where'd he get 'em?

"The boys made up their minds to find out. Sawdy got him down to McAlpin's barn but when he began to pump Barney the cuss showed fight. You know Henry. He'd never use a gun on a shrimp with a knife. So the rest of us waiting in the corral, carried Barney out of the barn, showed him a rope by the light of the lantern and asked him how about that fire."

Carpy shook his head. "Dangerous business, John. Did you string him up?"

"Hell, no. I hadn't no more 'n' adjusted the noose and asked him, was it comfortable under his ear, when he told the whole story. McCrossen hired him to do it for Van Tambel."

Carpy muttered an angry epithet.

"Gave him two hundred and promised two more when the job was done—what do you think of that, Doc?"

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Carpy was silent a moment. "Rotten business. But what's the good of stringing Barney up? He'll deny everything. That ain't the only thing, John. The old devil couldn't be convicted. But it would make a nasty mess to try Van Tambel for hiring Rebstock—and where would the shame land? On Jane Van Tambel. And she head over heels in love with Bill Denison and he with her—what the hell can you do?"

LeFever sitting half up on Carpy's table, one leg swinging free, looked vexed. "A mix-up, Doc. A mix-up, sure enough—what *can* be done?"

"You fellows better've asked me that afore you began stringing Barney up. I'll tell you," added Carpy, after a moment's thought. "There's only one thing I know of you can do now. Bill Denison is the man most interested in the situation the way it stands."

"I guess we can't get away from that," admitted LeFever.

"Lay the whole mess before Bill and ask *him* what's to be done."

LeFever was doubtful. "I don't know what the boy will say, Doc."

"And I don't care a hang," retorted Carpy. "That's all they'll get from me."

Next morning Carpy was making his rounds at the hospital. In the corridor he encountered LeFever. John took off his hat and scratched his head. "Well, Doc!" he exclaimed.

"Well," echoed Carpy, "what you doing up here?"

"We talked it over——"

"Who's we?"

"Why Sawdy, McAlpin, Bob Scott, Ben Page 'n' me. We talked it over 'n' concluded to follow your talk—put it up to Bill."

"Sit down there in the office till I see him myself."

"O. K. Doc. I'll go in and set with Sawdy. How's Henry coming?"

"You can't kill a cowman with a paper knife."

LeFever stared indignantly. "A paper knife! Did you see it?"

"No."

"Well, the blade's about two feet long with a double edge you could shave a horse with—paper knife!" John retired, storming.

DOCTOR CARPY opened the door of Denison's room. Close to Bill, who sat with bandaged eyes, in an armchair, stood Jane, arranging some briar roses in a vase.

Denison was fingering rather nervously, his eye bandage.

Jane turned. "Oh, here's Doctor Carpy, Bill. Good morning, Doctor!"

"Any morning's a good morning when a man can set eyes on an up-an'-coming girl like you," said Carpy. "Bill," he continued brusquely, "you're too slow. If I had as good a sight for sore eyes as she is, right close to me, I'd take a peek at her if I had to go blind the rest of my life."

Jane turned away with a protesting smile. Denison looked confused. "Say!" exclaimed Carpy suspiciously, "What's been going on here?"

"Aren't these wild roses dear, Doctor?" Jane asked calmly, holding the vase up for his inspection. "I've been——"

"Say, what's been going on here?" repeated Carpy. "What have you two been up to? Bill," he said suddenly, "you've been moving that bandage!"

"Why, no," protested Denison feebly.

"Jane!" said Carpy sternly. "What have you been doing?"

"Arranging these roses," returned Jane evenly.

"Who moved this bandage?"

It took further probing to bring out the facts. But Carpy drove the culprits to the end.

"Why, I *did* lift the bandage for a few seconds," confessed Denison.

"What for?"

"To look at the roses."

"Bill, you're a blamed liar. You lifted it to look at this girl—didn't he, Jane?"

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Carpy thundered the question in his most aggressive manner.

"How do I know, Doctor?" asked Jane demurely.

"Look at me, girl!" commanded Carpy. Jane faced him unabashed, but with the pink slowly flowing into her cheeks. She laughed. "It was only for a *second,* Doctor," she confessed. "I'm going to put one of these roses in your buttonhole." She stepped very close to the doctor to adjust the boutonniere. She was so fresh and so fragrant. Then, too, her breath was sweet and the pink in her cheek—the one closest the doctor's eyes—put the briar rose to blush. Doctor Carpy stood slightly rattled as he hunted vainly for a pin and finally waited for Jane to find one.

"Jane," he said at last, "if you'll agree to do that every morning for me, I'll keep this bum bandaged up a month—what say? You needn't laugh. I mean it."

Her laugh was a ripple. "Doctor, I'm game, if you can fix it with Bill."

In a fraction of a moment, the veteran surgeon was the cool, keen man of medicine again.

"Bill," he said, sitting down by his patient, "tell me just what and how much did you see when you lifted that bandage?"

"Doc, I'll confess, I couldn't see much—just a blur."

"And your eyes ache and sting now, don't they?"

"They burn a little, Doc."

"I'll say, they burn a little. How many mornings has this been going on?"

Denison was silent. "Only yesterday and today, Doctor," confessed Jane, hesitatingly.

"Well, don't try it any more. If you do, I'll put you back in a dark room. I only let you out here on the theory you'd behave yourself."

"How is he, Doctor?" asked Jane anxiously, after Carpy had finished his examination.

"He'd be doing fine, Jane, if I could keep you away from him!"

"Oh, Doctor!" exclaimed the girl reproachfully, "You don't mean *that.*"

"Not exactly. But no more monkey-shines, or I'll bandage up his mouth!"

"That's a fine thing to say after my pinning a rose on you," protested Jane. "I'm insulted."

Carpy picked up his bag. "Meet me at the hotel at twelve and I'll apologize and give you something to eat—say you will?"

Jane nodded. Carpy carried the picture of her smile part way down the corridor, only to be waylaid by LeFever.

Chapter XXXI

Denison Hears

"COME into Sawdy's room a minute, Doc," pleaded LeFever. "He'd like to talk this thing over with you."

Sawdy propped up in bed led the talk. But the talk was not to Doctor Carpy's liking. "Yes," he muttered scornfully, "I expected that's the way it would work out. If there's a mean job to be done in this town, put it on me."

"Oh, no, Doc. Oh, no!" protested Sawdy and LeFever together.

"Oh, yes, Doc. Oh, yes," echoed Carpy resentfully. "You fellows set yourselves

like a mob to administer justice and then find there's none you dare administer. And you want *me* to tell Bill Denison. I won't do it. You can talk to him yourself, Sawdy."

But the pair now working on the doctor's sympathies, knew their victim pretty well and having once brought him to refuse their request, needed only to persevere in order

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to make him grant it. This brought Carpy back that afternoon to Denison, alone.

"Doctor," said the injured man, "I couldn't be sure this morning when Jane was here whether you were talking to encourage her, and me, or whether you really think you can save my sight."

"Bill, I was honest in what I said," returned Carpy. "I believe and hope I can save your eyes. But it's not all in my hands; I told you that, too. If nature's willing, we're going to get through all right—does that satisfy you?"

"That's all I can ask, Doc."

"Then don't be so down in the mouth ——"

"It's pretty hard to face life, blind."

"Better men than you or I have done it."

"That may be. But I'll never do it."

"Bill Denison, don't be a blamed fool. If you have to do it, you'll do it," insisted Carpy brusquely. "To do anything else would break a nice girl's heart—you know that. If you love her as a man ought to love a woman, you'll stay by her, blind or not blind."

"I'd only be a burden to her."

"A burden beats a dead man all to death."

"Doctor, if I'd ever deserved such a thing. If I'd even taken a revenge on any man, I could understand how he'd wait his chance and get even with me. But I've thought and thought, sitting here blindfolded. I've racked my brains to recall anything I've ever done to white man or red to make one want to burn my house and burn me in bed——"

"Well, it's all past and gone now and they didn't burn you, Bill."

"If I lose my eyesight they might as well have done it. I'd like to see again, Doc, just long enough to kill the man that did it. After that, I might be willing to go blind. Damn him, I'll kill him if it's the last thing I do."

"Bill, I didn't come to discuss your shooting yourself, or shooting somebody else. Let Jane decide all that for you. She's got a level head—loves you better than life—trust her judgment. But if the poor rich girl ever learns what I've got to tell you now, Bill, she'll want to shoot *herself.*"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Bill, Sawdy and LeFever have found out who burned the ranch-house—and why it was set afire."

"Who was it?" asked Denison violently. Every vein in his neck and face swelled with angry blood. His fingers clenched the arms of his chair. His knuckles grew white.

"Keep cool, Bill; keep cool. It's a mean mess."

"Go on."

"You know how Henry and John feel about this thing. I've damned them for doing what they've done—but in my heart I couldn't blame 'em much for doing it." The embarrassed doctor was easing the recital along as best he could.

Denison was on fire. "Why don't you tell the story?" he demanded, angrily. "What did they do?"

"First," responded Carpy, determined not to be rushed, "they found that Barney Rebstock had a pocket full of money since the fire. They lured him down to McAlpin's barn. When Sawdy began to question him, he showed fight. The upshot of it was, the two went at it, hammer and tongs in a box-stall. Barney had a knife—he drove it through Sawdy's leg, and Sawdy was choking him to death when McAlpin and the boys heard the noise and stepped in to save the thief. Then they took him out behind the barn till he told his story.

"Mind you, this now is Barney's story—might or might not be the facts. He claimed he was paid two hundred dollars to set the house afire with a promise of two hundred more after he'd burned it."

Carpy paused. He thought the sickening truth must have already begun to penetrate Denison's mind; it had not.

"Who," he asked, with a fell epithet, "paid him to burn me up?"

"As Barney tells it," continued Carpy

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deliberately, "it was between McCrossen and Gus Van Tambel."

DENISON sprang from his chair. He tore the bandage from his sightless eyes. From his disfigured lips there poured a stream of bitter words.

"Not too fast, Bill—not too fast. Remember there'll be another to suffer like hell if this thing ever gets out."

"Oh, I know it must never get out. But that man! Doc, he ought to be roped and dragged to death by a wild horse. Look at the way he treated my brother for years—Jack would have been alive this minute, I believe, if it hadn't been for Gus Van Tambel. He's spent a fortune trying to beat us out of Spring Ranch. He worried my brother sick and poor. It's taken every dollar he and I could rake and scrape to fight him at Medicine Bend and in Washington. If ever a robber and a thief and a murderer deserved stringing up, that man does. He's killed, or had killed, every man that ever stood in his way of stealing land or cattle, or anything a man had that he wanted."

"Cool off, Bill, cool off."

Denison sat down with his hands over his face. It wrung Carpy's heart to see him suffer. "I can't, Doc. I can't!"

"Yes you can, damn you, and you *will*. Let me put that bandage back where it belongs—and you *keep it there*. Don't talk about eyesight unless you want it back. Where the hell do I come in? What am I getting out of this?"

"You'll get paid," muttered Denison.

"Paid!" roared Carpy. "You talk about pay, for the worry and sweat and sleep I've lost over you, damn you? Shut up and behave yourself!"

Carpy was at his roughest, and that was pretty rough. No man that came in contact with him at such moments ever forgot his tongue-lashings. When they were needed he could administer them.

But now he was administering one purely as medicine. He was striving to check the most dangerous passions that can at terrible moments overwhelm a man capable of better things than suicide or bloodshed. It was a battle between two strong wills and it was long in the waging. But when Carpy, wiping the sweat from his forehead and, almost unstrung himself, left Denison's side, his patient had ridden out the storm and had promised quiet till the two could think of what might be done, pledging in the interval mutual and absolute secrecy.

CHAPTER XXXII

JANE HEARS

SECRECY, however well pledged, grows more difficult to control in proportion to the number of persons pledged.

Carpy swore Sawdy and LeFever to it very easily. McAlpin and Ben Page were warned if the story leaked out it might become unpleasant for both. As for Bob Scott, no one was ever known to worm a secret out of him; Barney, of course, dared not talk.

Yet it will easily be understood that too many people had the story; and only the continual efforts of Doctor Carpy in silencing, through threats of what might happen to them, one or another of the conspirators kept it under cover.

Jane, after the usual storm with her father, who knew what she was doing, rode next morning into town to make her visit to the hospital.

Denison was a poor actor. In his endeavor to make Jane feel there had been nothing to upset him, he was over-solicitous. Carpy did better; but he was compelled to admit that Denison had not been doing quite so well—since Jane could see that for herself.

For days the tension continued, despite every effort Denison could make to conceal it. He was demonstrative almost beyond his wont; dwelt on their future with more than ordinary fervor; of affectionate solicitude there was no lessening, Jane realized all this. Yet when a keen-witted girl gets it into her head that her lover has a secret

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from her, who can deceive her very long?

"Bill, dear," she said one morning—it was some little time after Carpy's disclosure—"you don't seem just exactly yourself lately. Something must be on your mind. What is it, Bill?" She was solicitous and tender. He tried to answer as she had asked.

"Why, Jane, nothing at all that I know of. Of course it's pretty hard sitting here since he put me in the dark again. I expect that's it, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, Bill," she assented. But she seemed doubtful.

"It must be that," he went on, even more earnestly. "Come over here. Sit closer."

"You wouldn't keep a secret from me, Bill, would you?"

"I certainly wouldn't, Jane."

"Especially if it concerned either of us, or our happiness in any way, would you?"

"I never have had and never will have any secret from you that concerns our happiness. Even if I must go blind, Jane you shall know it as soon as I do. And I'll release you from every promise, Jane."

"But you're not going blind, dear Bill! Don't think on such a thing. And if you were, do you think that would make any difference with me and my promise? Haven't I told you that a hundred times? You shall never get rid of me, dear boy, while I can stagger to your side and be your hands and eyes and everything I know how to be to the man I love; to the man that loves me; to the man that saved my life almost at the price of his own. What are you thinking of?" She drew his head down into her arms.

ANOTHER day, lunching with Doctor Carpy at the hotel, Jane spoke of Denison. "Something is worrying him, Doctor," she said pointedly. "Tell me what it is?"

Carpy laughed. "Can't be my bill, can it, Jane?"

"Don't make fun of me, Doctor. I know he has something on his mind. And you know what it is—don't you?"

It was difficult to be hard-hearted to such an appeal from Jane; yet his lips were sealed. "You're sure it's not your imagination, Jane?"

"Be honest with me, Doctor. You must have noticed it yourself."

"To tell the truth, Jane, I have noticed a change. But what of it? He's been cooped up there for quite a while—longer than he expected—really longer than I expected. Of course, I couldn't tell the boy what bad shape he was in. Maybe I encouraged him too much. He sees where I didn't make good and he's getting discouraged over the time he's been blindfolded. That would account for anything you've noticed, Jane."

She was silent. He saw that more was needed. "What should you think of this, Jane? Have a little talk with Bill. Ask him, honest, if he wouldn't like to go to

the big hospital at Medicine Bend; or go to Chicago where he could have better care and a better eye-surgeon. No, no, don't disclaim—put it up to Bill. I couldn't do it successfully. But you might. Say you will. Promise?"

Jane's eyes dimmed. He continued to banter her; but to divert her he stuck to his point.

"Doctor," she said at last, "I'll do it since you insist. I know perfectly well what Bill will say. And to be frank, I don't believe that has the slightest thing to do with his worry. But I'll do it."

She rose. The two went into his private office. "Jane, you're a good girl. That means about everything in life. When a man finds a girl like you, there's not much

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else in life to look for. Take it from me, anyway or anyhow, everything's going to come out all right. Don't cry your pretty eyes out for fear it won't."

With her suspicions lulled, Jane kept her promise to Carpy and had a talk with Denison about going East for treatment. He scoffed at the idea. And as the days wore by, Bill seemed more natural to her. She began to think her fears baseless.

Her father continued taciturn and aloof. Jane knew she was defying him by continuing to visit Denison, but being of much the same tenacious will as her parent himself, she reckoned little of it.

But her visits and ministrations to the injured neighbor of Gunlock ranch became so frequent and she herself was so wholly indifferent to comment; that the situation became food for local gossip. Here was Van Tambel a deadly enemy of Denison's, with his daughter openly showing a very special interest in Denison's condition at the hospital—carrying to him delicacies and spending with him half her time in town.

THINGS were at this pass when one day Van Tambel told his daughter he must go to Medicine Bend on some bank business. Jane knew that he was not able to make the trip—Carpy had told her more than once that the old man's life hung by a thread. She pleaded with her father, found out what the business was, and offered to go in his stead.

Van Tambel never could reach a conclusion without a more or less violent discussion. But increasing weakness in the rugged old frame making itself felt daily more keenly, decided him to depend on Jane for a messenger.

She took the morning train for Medicine Bend, secured the further time on his notes at the bank, spent the night at the Mountain House and took the afternoon train west for Sleepy Cat.

The Pullman cars were crowded. Jane was forced to find a seat in a day coach. Here she placed her handbag in the seat beside her, bought a magazine and resigned herself to a long afternoon and evening.

After a light supper in the dining car, she came back to find the coach filling as they neared Sleepy Cat Two men had taken the seat directly behind her. Jane resumed her reading until in the conversation between the two passengers her attention was attracted by catching the name of Bill Denison.

Her curiosity once aroused, it was easy to follow the drift of their talk. Presently she heard mention of her father's name. Aroused now to keen interest, Jane was torn between the feeling that she ought not to listen and the impulse that she must.

"Of course, nobody can prove it," were the words she heard. "I didn't say they could. That old bird knows too well how to cover his tracks. But everybody knows how he deviled Denison's brother when he lived there—tried to buy him out, then scared him out and then smoked him out. The old devil has been crazy every since he owned Gunlock to get hold of that little Spring Ranch. Why? Account of the water. It's the biggest spring in the hills. Now that he's back from the hospital, the first thing he thinks of is to get hold of that spring."

Jane listened with bated breath.

"Why, it's common talk in Sleepy Cat," the narrator went on, "that he paid Barney Rebstock to set Bill's ranch-house afire and came damned near burning Bill up in it."

Her heart stopped beating as she heard the dreadful recital, delivered as calmly as the merest bit of current gossip would be discussed on a street corner.

"According to what I hear," continued the narrator, "Sawdy and some of Bill's friends choked the story out of Barney. Sawdy got cut up in the fracas with him—Sawdy was laid up in the hospital for a month. Barney's a mean devil with a knife."

The train was pulling into Sleepy Cat. Jane rousing herself from a stupor, her breath choking her, her heart ready to

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burst with every beat, staggered to her feet, dazed, and supporting herself along the aisle with her hands alternately on the backs of the seats, stepped blindly down to the platform.

BULL PAGE who was in with the team and buckboard to take her home, reached for her handbag. "No, Bull," Jane said quietly, "I'm not going out tonight——"

"Not going out?"

"I'm staying in town."

"Staying in town?" stammered Bull, vastly surprised.

"Drive me to the hotel," Jane said wearily, "I'll take a room there. You drive home and come back for me tomorrow afternoon."

It was ten o'clock. Assigned to a room, Jane freshened herself after the long, dusty car ride, bathed her face and temples again and again in cold water and tried to collect her throbbing thoughts.

It all seemed like a hideous dream. Surely it could be shaken off; surely men could not be so fiendish as to plot fire and so horrible a death as would follow, to sleeping men.

Her father! She shuddered. That thought was most horrible of all—incredible—and yet?

Of one thing she felt certain—if it were true, she could no longer live under the same roof with him and the duty—terrifying to think of—of learning the revolting truth from his own lips confronted her.

And her lover—Bill, blinded Bill—what now of him? Could she ever face him again. What would he say? What would he do?

He knew the truth. No doubt remained in her mind on that point. No need now to ask why he seemed worried and changed. Was he only waiting, trying to decide how to tell her he could not marry her—that her father had blinded him—that they must part?

She threw open her window and kneeling before it looked out upon the silent, far-stretching desert with its myriad of heavenly lights. The cool air cleared her head. But what could loosen the deadly grief and shame that clutched at her pounding heart?

And when her own father thrust himself into her thoughts it brought feelings of horror she could not endure. Finally the longed-for tears burst from her tortured heart and able longer neither to speak or to think, she sank to the floor hysterical and moaning.

When her senses returned, the cold night air of the desert had chilled her. Brokenly, she drew herself up from the floor, fell exhausted on the bed and sank into a sobbing sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII

JANE RESIGNS

WHEN Doctor Carpy walked into his office from the dining room after breakfast next morning, he saw Jane Van Tambel standing before the window, looking out.

"Why, Jane," he exclaimed. "What brings you here so early?"

She looked around at him in silence. The doctor walked over to her and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Jane," he asked, "what has happened?"

The grief in her sunken eyes was too apparent. "Tell me!" he asked with a shade of sternness. "What is it?"

Her lip began to quiver; he saw that words were not far away.

Then more tenderly. "Come, sit down, child," he said, leading her to a chair and closing the office door.

"First," he continued encouragingly, "have you just come from home?" She shook her head.

"Where did you stay last night?"

"Here," she answered.

"At the hotel?" she nodded.

"Have you had your breakfast?"

"I don't want any, Doctor."

"Then try to compose yourself enough

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to tell me what all this means. It's nothing about Bill?"

"Oh, Doctor!" the exclamation came like a burst of suffering long pent, "I know everything."

Startled by the words, and realizing full well exactly what they meant, Doctor Carpy could yet be only cautious. "That's a strange expression, my dear child," he said soothingly. "What do you mean by saying 'I know everything'?"

"All about the fire," she sobbed though her eyes were dry. Carpy could only spar for time. "What fire, Jane?" he asked.

She started as if with an impulse of fury. "The fire started to burn Bill's ranch-house; the fire that nearly cost him his life and has cost him his sight! That's what I mean! Oh, Doctor! Doctor! You knew about it all."

He saw the fat was flatly in the fire. Indeed he had long had only a faint hope of keeping the facts from Jane. His real hope had been that she might not hear the truth, till he could save Denison's eyes and thus cushion the horrid shock that the facts must bring to an innocent sufferer.

She had thrown her arms on the table in front of her. Her head sank between them.

Doctor Carpy rose, walked around to her side, lifted her head and standing beside her, supported it in his arms. "Jane," he said slowly, looking down into her pitiful eyes, "from what you tell me, I see that you have heard the loose stories floating around——"

"You, too, have heard them, Doctor. Why? *Why*, didn't you tell me?"

"Jane!" explained the doctor, driven from his last stronghold of reserve by the poignancy of her grief. "How the hell could I tell you a story involving those it did in such an affair? Actually, nobody knows just what the facts are. Now we must get started right. First you tell me all you heard. Then I'll tell you all I've heard—is that fair?"

Brokenly, and pausing at intervals to control her voice, Jane gave him the train story.

Carpy had bowed his head.

"Well," he commented as she looked soberly up, "That's not far from what I've been told myself. But, Jane, I'm not a bit sure we have the facts in these stories. They all depend on the word of one of the worst characters in this country. Barney Rebstock wouldn't hesitate at anything low-down in the whole range of crime—anybody in town will tell you that. He's not only an ex-convict but the biggest liar in this whole country."

He spoke slowly and earnestly hoping that his words would sink in enough to be anodyne to her helpless grief. They seemed to make no impression.

"Doctor," she said solemnly, "does Bill know all that you and I know?"

"Jane," he answered in like, "Bill knows all that you and I know."

"Oh, I knew it. I knew it. To think that poor I should have brought this horror into his life!"

"Jane, that's not so—not by any possible gloss of the facts. Your father and the

Denison boys have been enemies for as many years as I've been in Sleepy Cat. This might all have happened if you never had seen this country——"

"Oh, if only I never had! I hate it! I'll never live here or endure it! And I want you to do one last favor for me, Doctor, will you?"

"What is it, Jane?"

"Promise me, first?"

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He walked over to his chair and faced her. "Jane, I won't promise it will be the last favor. For as long as you live, and I live, I'll do you any favor you ever ask. I know you'll never ask an unworthy one. I promise."

"I never expect to see Bill again. I know now how it has caused him grief and pain to see me since he has known——" Carpy tried to break in. "Don't interrupt me, Doctor—*I* know."

"You *don't* know!" thundered Carpy. "And you needn't say you do!"

"You promised——"

"All right, go ahead!"

"I want you to say to Bill that I freely release him from his promise of marriage; that I beg him to forgive me all I have innocently caused him to suffer—and that I will leave here forever——"

"Jane!" exclaimed her listener with all the indignation and reproach he could throw into the one word.

She raised her hand. "I'm not done yet——"

"Go on!" he snapped, bluntly.

"My father has made me his heir to Gunlock Ranch; he has no other heir. This morning, I will deed whatever I inherit from my father to William Denison, to atone as far as I can for the wrongs my father has done him."

"Well?" remarked Carpy coldly.

"That is all."

"And that is what you want me to tell Bill?"

"That, Doctor, is what I want Bill to know. Oh, if I had another to do it for me, dear Doctor, I wouldn't put it on you. But whom have I to go to? To whom can I turn?" her voice broke.

Carpy rose to his feet. "Come here, girl!" He spoke roughly. Jane rose and walked obediently to him. He clasped her in his arms. "Since Bill isn't here to do this—I'll do it for him. Jane, you're sending me on a fool's errand. But seeing I'm nothing but an old fool I expect I'm just the man for the job. I can tell you now what he'll say just as well as if I'd seen him and given him your message. But I know, of course, that wouldn't satisfy you. So I'll go—and go now.

"But mark what I'm going to say. There's about as much chance of Bill's releasing you from marrying him as there is of my being the King of England. But—if he should—it won't do Jane any good, for I'll claim Jane Van Tambel myself. Oh, I mean it. If you leave here forever, I'll follow you forever. You'll be wife and mother in spite of yourself. So pray that Bill doesn't release you!" he concluded grimly, "for if he does, I don't."

It was a final and sorrowful smile he extorted from her; but it was a smile; that, he said to himself, was at least something. "Now promise," he repeated, in parting, "you will stay right here in this office till I get back. I've got an emergency sick call to make—then straight to see Bill."

She promised.

BUT she was ill-prepared for what she saw when the office door was opened half an hour later and Doctor Carpy pushed Denison ahead of him into the office. Bill's eyes were bandaged. He groped a little with his hands—while the Doctor guided him to a chair.

Had a knife been thrust into Jane's heart, it could not have been more painful than what she felt at the sight of her blind and helpless lover. "Here he is, Jane," announced Carpy bluntly. "He can speak for himself."

Hesitating, trembling in dismay, biting her quivering lip, heedless of the tears that rained down her cheeks, Jane stood, afraid to speak. She had released him—what dared she do or say? He must speak first.

She had not an instant to wait. No sooner did Denison feel himself seated in a chair than he held out his arms and said, not with apparent deep feeling, not with pained emotion, but in the most common-place, everyday matter-of-fact manner. "Where's my girl?"

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He had learned his lesson well. Carpy had drilled him: "If I let you go down there, you've got to behave," the doctor had warned him. "No fireworks, damn you. No emotion, Bill, just plain everyday goings on. That girl is awful near the snapping point, Bill. It's you must cool her down, ca'm her down! I'm more afraid for her now than I am for you."

The old doctor watched Jane run timidly to Denison's side. "Bill!" she exclaimed brokenly. "Here I am!"

He caught both her arms, drew her upon his knee, crushed her head against his breast and imprisoned her lips.

It was a solemn and a long session. Delicacy would have impelled the doctor to withdraw, but he feared emotion might carry them too far and he stood watching and commenting.

"Break away, there, Bill; break away! Give the girl a chance to breathe." And as they slowly separated, he continued, "I don't see but that a blind man can do it as well as anybody."

Denison paid no attention to the raillery. "What's all this talk I hear about your quitting me, Jane?" he asked unsteadily. "You can't do that. Why, we're tied together tighter than Siamese twins! How come?"

"Bill, I thought you ought at least to have a——"

"Well, I've had my chance, haven't I? And this is my answer. Till death us do part! Nothing less, nothing else goes! Is that plain? I gave you a chance the other day to quit me—what was your answer?"

"So that's the way of it," bantered Carpy. "First one resigns, then t'other resigns—then they fall to again like this!

"Well, young ones, now you've had questions and answers. Resignations tendered and rejected. The next thing is something to eat—Bill's had no breakfast."

"Bring my breakfast right here, Doctor," said Denison peremptorily.

"What, with Jane setting on your lap?"

"Just exactly as we are. She's going to stay here and going to feed me my breakfast!"

Of course, there were tears; but Doctor Carpy was not afraid of that kind of tears.

(To be concluded in the next SHORT STORIES*)*

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And Some of Them Did Before the Construction Company Blasted Its Way Through That Blasted Hanniford Cut

EVEN THE WISE MAY CRACK

By CARMONY GOVE

Author of "The Knuckle Chucker," "Tough in Spots," etc.

ON THE Railroad Company's maps and the Johnson Construction Company's records it bore the innocent name of The Hanniford Cut. But blasting that cut into the side of a solid mountain of rock was one tough job. That was why old Jeff Johnson had put Wise Man Miller in charge of the hard-rock work. Now, old Jeff had come West to see for himself what was wrong. He sat tilted back in a corner of the office shack. Sunlight coming

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through a dinky window revealed a slight sandy tinge to his gray hair.

"First time I ever knew Wise Man Miller to be stumped by a few streaks of soft stuff," he said.

"Yeah?" Miller stiffened. "Maybe it ain't the soft stuff."

"No?"

"No. It's this crew of old fogies you wished on me. I admire your taking care of the old hands—these times—and they're dependable. But, hell! Gotta have a little luck on a job like this, and these old-timers have worn theirs out—long ago. What I need is some—some flaming youth."

Johnson grunted and studied Wise Man Miller. "Flaming youth, huh?" he muttered. "A wise crack. Well," his eyes twinkled, "even the wise may crack."

"Wh—what?"

"Er-r—nothing." Johnson stood up. The switch engine was ready to take him to the Junction, where he would catch the Limited. He paused in the doorway. "I'll send you your flaming youth."

Three days later, the flaming youth arrived.

Miller was still smarting from old Jeff Johnson's proddings. He had hard-rocked from the Canadian Cobalt south to the Andes. An ability to look over a job, analyze any trouble and, usually, to figure a way to straighten things out had earned him the name of Wise Man Miller, though mighty few had the nerve to call him that openly. But old Jeff Johnson wouldn't hesitate to call the devil himself, Algernon, and Miller had always been Wise Man Miller to Johnson. So it wasn't that which had got under Miller's skin.

But, "Even the wise may crack!" That's what old Jeff had muttered.

A hundred times Miller had gritted his teeth over that. The old man thought he was losing his grip, cracking up. And now, old Jeff was piling it on—too thick.

THE big-framed, sloping-shouldered six-footer, who loomed beside Miller's desk in the office shack was a youngster—he had youth all right. That part was okay. But Johnson had gone too far. This youth was flaming youth; his hair was as red as—— Well, there just wasn't any single word to describe its flaming magnificence. He grinned good-naturedly and handed Miller a letter.

Even before Miller ripped the envelope, he guessed just about what the letter contained. Sure enough, he read:

Mr. Wise Man Miller:

Here is the flaming youth I promised you. He is a driller with plenty of luck.

Yours truly,

Jefferson K. Johnson,

Pres. Johnson Construction Co.

Miller bit his lip. It was a heavy lip; Miller was a big heavy man from the ground up.

"Where you been working?" he asked harshly.

"In the office."

"In the office! Hell and dam——" Johnson shook the letter. "I don't want no office boy. This says——"

"Oh, I've only been in the office a couple of months, just since I finished up at The School of Mines."

"Jumpin' dynamite! I s'pose you learned hard-rocking in a college, huh? Oh, my——"

"No. I worked—vacations. And one year I dropped out the whole year. Got to be a driller."

"Yeah? What Job?"

"The Big Three Tunnel."

"Humph!" Miller scowled across the room to where the timekeeper and the material clerk were bending to their work a little too assiduously, considering the way their shoulders were twitching. He remembered that the Big Three Tunnel job had been another tough one; old Jeff had come out of the office to run it, himself. Confound old Jeff! This was where Wise Man Miller made a monkey out of Jefferson K. Johnson—maybe. He would put the youngster on the spot and, if he made

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good, the laugh would be the other way around.

"I can handle blasting, too," the youngster volunteered.

"Th' hell you can! And I'll bet you can dress tools, run the air-compressors, repair——"

"Yes, sir, and lay track for the mucking crews."

FOR a few seconds, Miller couldn't talk. He threw a pencil at the time-keeper and the material clerk, whose shoulders had stopped twitching and were actually shaking. Then he leaned back and his face assumed the lined mask he wore when he lost money, as he usually did, in a poker game.

"Reg'lar all-'round man, eh?" he said finally. "Well now, so we can keep our records straight when you get to be superintendent, what's your name, Red?"

"You said it."

"What?"

"Red."

"Red *what?*"

"Oh! Red Johnson."

"Johnson?" The lids tightened over Miller's eyes. He looked from the youngster down to the company name in heavy black type across the top of a report sheet on his desk, and back up at the youngster, who got the idea and grinned.

"Yeah, same name," he admitted. "It happens that way. Small world. I'll bet I know forty Johnsons and nearly that many Millers and——"

"All right, all right! Get over to camp and stuff your guts. They'll need it. You'll go to work with the noon shift—drilling too, by damn, with old Cracker Smith! And you'd better be good at it."

Red Johnson said, "Thanks," and went out with his battered leather bag. He put on his hat and then forgot he had it on and tried to scratch his red thatch. Damn! Trying to scratch his head with his hat on! He just wouldn't do tricks like that. Those were the things that made people think he was a rummy. And that man Miller—the way he got all heated up, just from a little talking. And that was Wise Man Miller! But what—how—?

Red's lips began moving with the words, "How does it go? Even—oh yeah, 'Even the wise may crack.'" Red nodded. That was the way he'd heard it. "But I'll bet nobody'd dare say that to Wise Man Miller's face."

Back in the office, Miller got out an employment card. An employee's surname always came first. Miller wrote "Johnson", then hesitated. Red? He should have the actual first name. But it didn't matter. If Red's name was George Washington Johnson, he'd still be plain Red. Call him anything else and nobody would know who was meant. Afterward, Miller got a letterhead and wrote to Johnson:

The flaming youth arrived. The youth part is okay. But if the flaming part sets the camp on fire, I will return the remains by express—COLLECT.

Miller.

As Miller finished, he heard a shout of laughter from the camp that roared above the rumble from the job beyond. Red Johnson had entered the bunk house and set his bag down.

"Hi, Red!"

RED blinked his gray eyes and scrutinized some forty men of the afternoon shift, who went to work at noon and were now waiting for eats. He didn't recognize a one. And there wasn't a youngster among them. But he always got along

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fine with older men. He grinned widely and waved a broad salute.

"Hi, gang! Who runs this shebang?"

A shriveled old-timer jerked a thumb in the direction of the kitchen at the end of the bunk-house. "Th' head cook." Red started in that direction and stumbled over his leather bag. That was what brought the roar of laughter which Miller heard. Somebody chortled:

"Feet like hams! What d' y' wear, Red—fourteens?"

"You'd best learn to pick 'em up and lay 'em down, then."

This was a new voice. Red didn't like the tone. He spotted the owner, a man with a scarred and powder-blackened face and a permanent grouch. A first glance would have marked him over fifty, but he got to his feet with a resiliency that few men possess after forty, and he was no more than that, veteran hard-rocker though he was. Red grinned and told him:

"I'm saving my money to take some dancing lessons."

"A fresh red-head, huh? I'll learn——"

The man had advanced toward Red. His right hand shot out in an open-handed slap. But the slap didn't land, because Red had moved his head—just far enough. Then a couple of old-timers were in between.

"Aw, cut it, Buck. What d' y' want to pick on th' kid, for?"

"What for? Why there wasn't to be nobody but old hands on this job. And now Miller hires this kid——"

"Forgit it. We're a danged sight older 'n you are, and if we ain't kickin', you ain't got no shout comin'."

The man with the scarred and blackened face turned away. Red learned his full name, when the head cook told him:

"Eats are comin'. Squat here—'cross from Buck Turner."

Turner scowled at him, but Red paid no attention. The trouble was that Red was heavy-handed at times, just as he was heavy-footed at others. His hands were big and lean and tough and he bore down a little too hard at the job of cutting a chunk of beef. It slipped from the tin plate, skidded across the table, just missing Turner's plate and landing in his lap.

Red expected trouble, but the chuckles around the table had Turner stopped. He only snarled:

"Clumsy red-heads get my goat. Some day I'm going to take one apart to see why."

The hot flush left Red's cheeks. "I hope I'll be there."

"Just stick around."

ON THE way to the job, Red inquired for Cracker Smith and found him to be the shriveled old-timer who had first directed him to the head-cook. Red fell into step with Smith. The old fellow squinted up at him.

"Red, I wouldn't aggervate Buck Turner none, if I was you and could help it."

"Aw, Turner's all right. He's just feeling a bit ouchy."

"Humph! He's always a bit ouchy and nasty and mean and plain cussed. Been that way ever since a blast back-fired on him oncet and spoiled his map. I know 'im right well, seein' as he's my drillin' pardner."

Red had been watching the men they were meeting coming off the morning shift, looking for a familiar face and seeing none. But at Cracker Smith's last remark, he turned quickly.

"Was," he said.

"Was what?"

"Turner *was* your drilling pardner. Mr. Miller said I was to pair off with you."

Old Cracker Smith halted abruptly. Jazbo Horner and Tim Callahan nearly trampled him. He shouldered them aside and spat an amber stream at their tracks in the dust.

"'Tain't so," he barked. "But if 'tis so, it's also hell. My gosh, kid! Me and Buck is th' lead crew."

"That'll be fine."

Red started on, impatient to be at it.

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They were up to where the muckers were working back some broken rock spilled loose by the noon blasts. Cracker stumbled after him.

"Yeah, fine as hell—maybe." Then Cracker Smith offered another possibility. "Maybe Miller is pairing somebody else with Buck for a lead crew, and settin' me back—with you."

Red thought he detected a bit of relief in the other's otherwise disgruntled tone, and he smiled at the older man.

"Say, you're not afraid of Turner, are you?"

"No-o. I ain't 'fraid of nobody. But Turner can slap th' ears off anybody in this camp, and he's done it to th' toughest ones at some time or t'other."

BUT Red's attention was already elsewhere. He had spotted Miller, who had come on the site to watch the noon blasts, and to make some changes in the crews. Cracker Smith's eyes bulged. The red-head was right. Miller was shoving Red right up on the number one drifter and putting Buck Turner clear back on the last machine. And Turner never let out a squeal.

Then old Cracker Smith got the idea.

"Horrible hell!" he gasped. "Th' job's gettin' too far from th' office for Miller to be watchin' it, hisself, on both shifts. He's fixin' to make Buck shift-boss, sure as——"

"Which is okay by me," Red said.

"Oh, Buck knows his hard-rockin', but—" Cracker shook his head, "—you might wish he never got to be shift-boss."

However, Red's attention again had drifted away from the old man's warnings. He was studying the cut, a triangular notch that was to be several miles long, blasted into the side of the mountain. The cross-section would vary along the job, but here near the start the vertical wall was over thirty feet high, sheer rock straight up and still showing drill scars and the smudges of many blasts. There were sloping horizontal streaks in that wall, lighter in color than the rest of the formation, and these caught Red's eye.

"Come on, come on, you Red, get going."

That was Miller calling, and Red turned to follow Cracker Smith who was already struggling with the support for their drifter, the compressed-air-driven rock-drilling machine. The support weighed plenty, but was set into place in a hurry when Red took hold. Red stepped back for the drifter itself, which weighed all of a hundred and thirty pounds. Cracker hurried to lend a hand, but Red picked the drifter up and handled it alone.

Cracker stood and wiped the back of a hand across his unbelieving eyes. "Crim-inent——"

The roar of the number two crew's drifter going into action cut Cracker off. The lead crew was being shown up, with Miller looking on. But Red had their drifter on the support.

The morning shift had the job of knocking off the top of the triangle—soft drilling, even from platforms. Some mornings they got in two blasts. That left the heavy work on the bottom section for the second shift. Red spudded in a drill point. Cracker coupled the air hose and opened up.

The drifter began to vibrate and jump. Cracker had given it too big a head of air and couldn't hold it steady. Red moved back in a long glide. He eased Cracker clear. The feel of the machine under his big hands seemed to drain away all his clumsy awkwardness. He steadied the machine to a staccato purr that is music to a hard-rocker's ears.

Miller turned away, no longer scowling.

"Flaming youth's a driller all right."

No one heard him, least of all Buck Turner, running the end drifter, where he could keep an eye on the others. Turner wouldn't have agreed, anyway. That night in the bunk house after supper he stopped in front of Red.

"That was a hell of a job of drilling you did this afternoon."

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RED looked up from the bench where he sat talking to Jazbo Horner. "I thought it was pretty good, myself," he said.

"Good?"

"Sure—didn't blast into those soft streaks at all."

"I'll say you didn't. You left a ridge at every streak."

"Uh-huh—on purpose. That way there isn't so much danger of them slacking far enough in to let something above slide out. They can be picked out easy, when it comes time to pack 'em with concrete, which had better be done 'fore long."

"Is that so?" Turner was already feeling the urge of the authority, which was to come with his being named shift-boss. "You're telling me?"

Suddenly, Red sensed that he was being prodded. No use dodging the issue. He moved his feet quickly, accidentally kicking Jazbo Horner's sore toe. Jazbo let out a yell, and Red said:

"You heard me, Mr. Turner. But I didn't mean——"

"Why, you damned fresh red——"

Turner punched straight out with his words. But Red was watching. He ducked and dove forward off the bench. His head rammed into Turner's middle. Turner sat down with a thud that jarred the plank flooring.

Every man in the place went alert. Others crowded in from the outside. Benches were moved back.

Red waited, his arms at his sides. Turner came up off the floor like a jackknife that is suddenly snapped wide open. Red shifted from his charge and straightened his left. His fist smacked the left side of Turner's face, the side that was most blackened and disfigured. The skin on that face felt queer to Red's knuckles. It sent a quiver to his stomach. He knew he couldn't deliberately send a fist to that face again.

Turner was something more than the usual wild-swinging camp bruiser. Yet Red evaded a second rush and a third, taking little punishment. Just as his awkwardness had left him at the feel of the vibrating drifter, just so it had left him again. There was no stumbling in his footwork; he was moving with the sure-footed tread of a big cat, and only dimly conscious of the shoutings of the onlookers.

"Cripes! You told me th' kid was a ham-foot!" . . . "But Buck'll get 'im." . . . "Yeah?" . . . "Take 'im, Buck." . . . "Go for his jaw, Red—you can't hurt his middle."

Red heard that last and was inclined to agree.

BUCK was getting mad when he missed. He made his first really wild swing. Red went under it and ripped a right hook to the middle. As before, it was like hitting an oak-staved barrel. But, this time, he felt Turner flinch and give. He crouched lower and tore in. Turner backed away and left an opening for an uppercut. Automatically, Red started a lifting blow from the knees, caught sight of that blasted face and missed the target.

Turner came in, punching, and landed two terrific jolts. Red rolled away from two more and then took one high on a side of his head that made him dizzy. He leaped back and crouched guarding his face. Then Turner made the mistake of coming on confidently straight up.

Red let him have it; a right hook to the short ribs. A left and another right hook, and another. His big fists buried themselves now in weakened muscles. Then he missed, fanned air.

Buck Turner was down, but only sitting down.

"Kick 'im over Red." . . . "Watch yourself, Buck." . . . "Give 'im th' boots, Red." . . . "Hey! Don't quit—now."

But Red stepped back. He had seen others put the boots to a man who was down, but he had no stomach for such work. Turner sat on the floor, his arms clamped over his battered short ribs. He stared up at Red with a hazy yet searching look.

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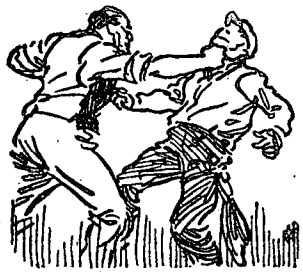
"What'd you say your name is?" he asked brokenly.

Red frowned in puzzlement. "Why, Red Johnson," he mumbled.

"Uh-huh." Speech was easier for Turner, now. "I getcha. And I know who learned you—that right hook to th' guts."

Red made no reply; none was called for. And he didn't believe Turner knew who



had taught him the trick of slipping that right hook across—low down. Still, he might.

The gang were moving bunkward, when old Cracker Smith came up and held out a hand. Red gripped it, wonderingly.

"What—?"

"Oh, nothing," Cracker grumbled. "It's been a hard day on an old man since you showed up. Thought maybe I'd gone a leettle off, and you wasn't real—or somethin'."

IF MILLER heard of the scrap, he kept mum about it. And he had no word for Red Johnson, at least not for a week. But he didn't miss any details about the work. The way it had picked up had him scratching his head. His crack to old Jeff Johnson about needing some flaming youth on the job had been just that—a wise crack. But it had worked. He mentally patted himself on the back for putting the youngster on the lead crew with Cracker Smith. Red was leading the way with the heavy drilling and the older crews were stepping to keep pace.

Then, one morning close to noon, Miller found Red and Buck Turner on the job together. They weren't due to go to work till noon, but there they were, acting chummy, looking and pointing up at those lighter streaks of soft stuff in the blasted off rock face. Turner was saying:

"By gad, Red! I b'lieve you're right."

"Sure I'm right, Buck." Red nodded sagely. "Any of these blasts are liable to jar it out."

Miller halted. Something queer about this. If Red was to get in bad with any of the men, Miller had expected it to be with Turner. But here they were, calling each other Red and Buck and, what was more striking, agreeing about something. Miller's curiosity got the better of him.

"What the hell are you two gabbing about?"

Buck turned around and began deferentially, "Why that strip of rock up there, between the second and third soft streaks—it's likely to be jarred out."

"Humph! No chance. Before that soft stuff slacks in deep enough to make trouble the concrete crew will be in here picking it out and packing in concrete."

"Ordinarily yes, Mr. Miller." Red was cutting in now, and agreeing with reservations. "But that particular stratum," Miller noted Red's use of the term stratum, where Buck had said strip, "it's just like a wedge, with the sharp edge to the back, and——"

"Says who?"

"Red does, Mr. Miller." Turner's jaw jutted forward. "And he's convinced me. That stuff ought to be pinned in there by drilling down from above and——"

Miller had looked up at the questioned place in the rock wall. He curled his lip and grunted, "Hooey!"

"I've figured it out from the inclines of the other strata, Mr. Miller," Red persisted, and Buck added:

"Yes, sir, and it ain't safe. Any blast night——"

"Forget it, you two. Keep out of the way, if you're scared. And don't go talking that kind of stuff to the gangs."

Red and Buck both shrugged and walked away, farther back from the front of the job. The morning shift was about ready

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to let go the noon blasts that would tip a hundred tons of rock from the top of the triangle and over into the gorge.

Wise Man Miller remained where he was, but the talk had made some impression. Several times he glanced up apprehensively at the rock wall. Where did that red-head get that stuff?—at college? Had the idea he was a geologist! by the time he's been on hard-rock work for thirty years—— Of course that strip—no, stratum—might be just a wedge-shaped slab. But that soft stuff, above and below, couldn't have slacked in far enough to make it dangerous. Still——

Miller stepped out of the way of a crew dragging their drifter equipment back from the front of the job. The blasts were loaded. The exploding wires from the battery were hooked on now.

"Everybody into the clear?"

The warning cry put a hop into everybody except Miller. He stood his ground. Wise Man Miller knew his stuff; he knew how far it was necessary to get back from a blast for safety. Besides, there were still two men between him and the shots. And a couple more, seeing him linger, remained nearby. Miller looked around and saw Red and Buck, fully fifty yards behind him, their eyes anxiously trained on the rock wall.

"The damned foo——"

"All clear."

The okay call had cut off Miller's talk to himself. The battery man shoved home the plunger switch. A trembling jarring roar, which would have panicked anybody but a hard-rocker, quivered and rolled along the job. A nice clean blast. Miller squinted through the ensuing dust, watching the tons of broken rock tipping over into the gorge. Its rumbling racket was like an echo to the blast. But a warning yell pierced even that.

HOWEVER, Miller was a big man and softened from too many years away from actual labor. His muscles no longer responded to his nerves with the old speed and precision. Those near him got clear. Miller was caught. The only direction in which he might have got entirely out of the way was toward the brink of the gorge. Too late, he tried to make it back to where Red and Buck and most of the gang were.

A section of that stratum, between the second and third soft streaks, wedge-shaped just as Red said it was and cracked loose vertically at either end, had come loose. It slid out of its niche as if it were greased—a twenty-ton slab, if it weighed a pound. It struck the floor of the cut, actually bounced once, and flipped over, flatwise. The thinner edge came down pointing toward the gorge. That was the edge which caught Miller and pinned him.

Red and Buck came up on the run with the others.

Miller lay on his right side. His right leg was pulled up under him and it was all right. But his left leg, from the knee down, was caught as if under a deadfall.

Buck and another man tried to pull Miller out from under.

Red shouted, "Hold it!"

They stopped tugging and he got down to explore. Miller's leg wasn't crushed, but it might be broken. A piece of the lip of the wedge had broken off and dropped and the huge slab had come down on that, with three or four feet of thinner edge of the slab overhanging. Miller's leg was between that supporting chunk of rock and where the thick edge of the slab rested on the floor of the cut.

Everybody had an idea. They all dwindled down to jacking up the overhanging and thinner edge of the slab.

Red shook his head. "It might crack in two." He pointed to a point in the slab that was obviously weak. "If it did, this thinner section would flip up and come down edgewise inside that supporting chunk of rock—if we use a jack."

"Well, what th' hell would you use—sky hooks?"

That started a round of sarcasm. Buck Turner cut them off with an oath. Red was still inspecting the slab. Miller

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groaned, fully conscious. Red got down beside him and ran an exploring hand under the slab. Then he got to his feet.

"Get me a stick of dynamite."

"You're crazy!" . . . "—kill 'im." . . . "Might as well hack his leg off as that." . . . "Yeah."

BUCK caught a man and spun him around. "You heard him! Get a stick of high stiuff—and fuse—and caps. Git!"

Red beckoned Buck. He explained. Buck scowled, then he got down and explored. He nodded. "It might work." Miller was cursing. Red and Buck callously ignored him. Then the dynamite was brought.

Buck broke the stick in halves. Red cut two pieces of fuse exactly the same length. Detonating caps were inserted. The half sticks of dynamite were placed lengthwise across the slab, the fuses to the center and the raw ends touching. Once again Red checked his calculations. Then he tore off his shirt, tossed it over Miller's head to keep off the blast of dust, leaned over the slab and lighted both fuses at the same time.

If there was a double roar as the free dynamite let loose, the interval between was too short to detect. The slab was broken in two, just back of that supporting chunk of rock underneath. The heavy section dropped down with a thud, but its fractured edge was too far back to crush Miller's leg. The thinner edge of the slab tipped in the other direction, the overhanging part overbalancing what remained unshattered on the inside of the support.

Miller was freed.

They drew him clear of the debris. A stretcher was already on the scene. He tried to get onto it unaided, but the great Wise Man Miller couldn't make it.

"My leg," he howled. "I never busted a bone before. But—my leg—its' cracked."

"Uh-huh." Buck helped him. "Easy, now."

"But, my leg—it's cracked—*my* leg."

Red caught the unbelief in Miller's voice. "Well, even the wise may crack," he muttered, his thoughts on the originator of that phrase.

But Miller's attention was caught and riveted. "Huh! What'd you say?"

Red grinned. "I said, even the wise may crack."

"Where——?" Miller lay back on the stretcher. "Where the hell did you hear that? That's was Jeff Johnson——"

Miller broke off. Through the clouds of pain, his mind was leaping to comprehension. Buck Turner's face twisted in a grin, a very unlovely grin, and he voiced Miller's thought for him.

"Sure, I reckon he might've heard old Jeff say it sometime. Old Jeff's his dad. Red ain't said so, but I tumbled to it first night he was here, when he begun shootin' right hooks to my ribs. I guessed who'd learned him that right hook, 'cause old Jeff finished me th' same way oncet—long time ago."

Miller flinched, but not entirely from pain.

"Damn, I might have guessed! I knew Jeff had a son, but just never s'posed he'd be—a hard-rocker—with no need to be—— Say, you fellows'll have to run things—for a spell."

"Okay. We'll keep 'er in th' middle of th' road, Mr. Miller," Buck Turner promised and waved the stretcher-bearers on with their load. Then he turned to Red Johnson.

"I reckon you'd best send for your dad, don't you, Mr. Johnson?"

Red shook his head. "I'll just wire him what's happened. And, Buck, if you don't want another right hook to the ribs, you'll keep on calling me just plain Red. Get me?"

"Okay, Red." Again Buck's face twisted in a very unlovely grin.

"Okay, Buck. Keep things rolling. I'm going in to the junction with Mr. Miller. Be back tonight."

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SNATCHERS

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Spider Webs," "Suds," and Other Stories of Stan Dvorak, Para-Art's Great Character Actor

CHAPTER I

A HUNDRED GRAND

MOE GANZ sat in Stan Dvorak's dressing room and stared in amazement as Para-Art's great character actor slowly transformed his attractive American features to something resembling an Oriental gargoyle.

"Phooie!" Moe exclaimed. "Such business. You look like one of the gargles on the buildings by Europe."

"This is my conception of Foo Young, the half-caste in your new picture, Snatchers," Stan explained.

"Foo Young," Moe mused. "Ain't I heard about that Chinese before?" he asked. "I got it now, Egg Foo Young, Chinese poultry business."

Moe Ganz had a habit of getting things badly balled up—excepting only business. Stan grinned. "You're thinking of egg foo young—a dish you get in noodle joints," he explained.

"So what?" Moe asked.

"In Snatchers, you'll recall the big shot is a half caste with deformed body, but an amazing brain. He has an abnormally large head," Stan said. "Something like this."

With tape he drew his eyes into a slanting position, covered the tape with a wax of his own manufacture, then with make-up deftly covered the wax. He lengthened his nose, widened the nostrils and built up four teeth until they resembled fangs which remained visible. Then he dislocated a shoulder, and twisted his body grotesquely. The effect was startling.

"Phooie!" Moe exclaimed. "A fine guy to meet in an alley on a dark night."

"A fine guy to meet any time," Stan answered. "Which reminds me; my tong meets Friday night and I won't be on the set. They made me a Yip Chin, you know, as a result of a little service I chanced to render one of their members."

"You save his life, and I nearly lose my best character actor and you call it a little service," Moe snorted. "You know what Kipling said. 'The West is East and the East is West and the two of 'em won't meet.' He's right. Keep up with this tong foolishness and first thing you know you'll be a general in the Chinese army, with five or six wives and a hundred dancing girls not to mention columbines."

"Columbines?"

"Yeah. A kind of a dame—Solomon had some of 'em. It says so in the Bible."

The Gang from the East Takes a Hint from a Screen Snatch—and Acts On It

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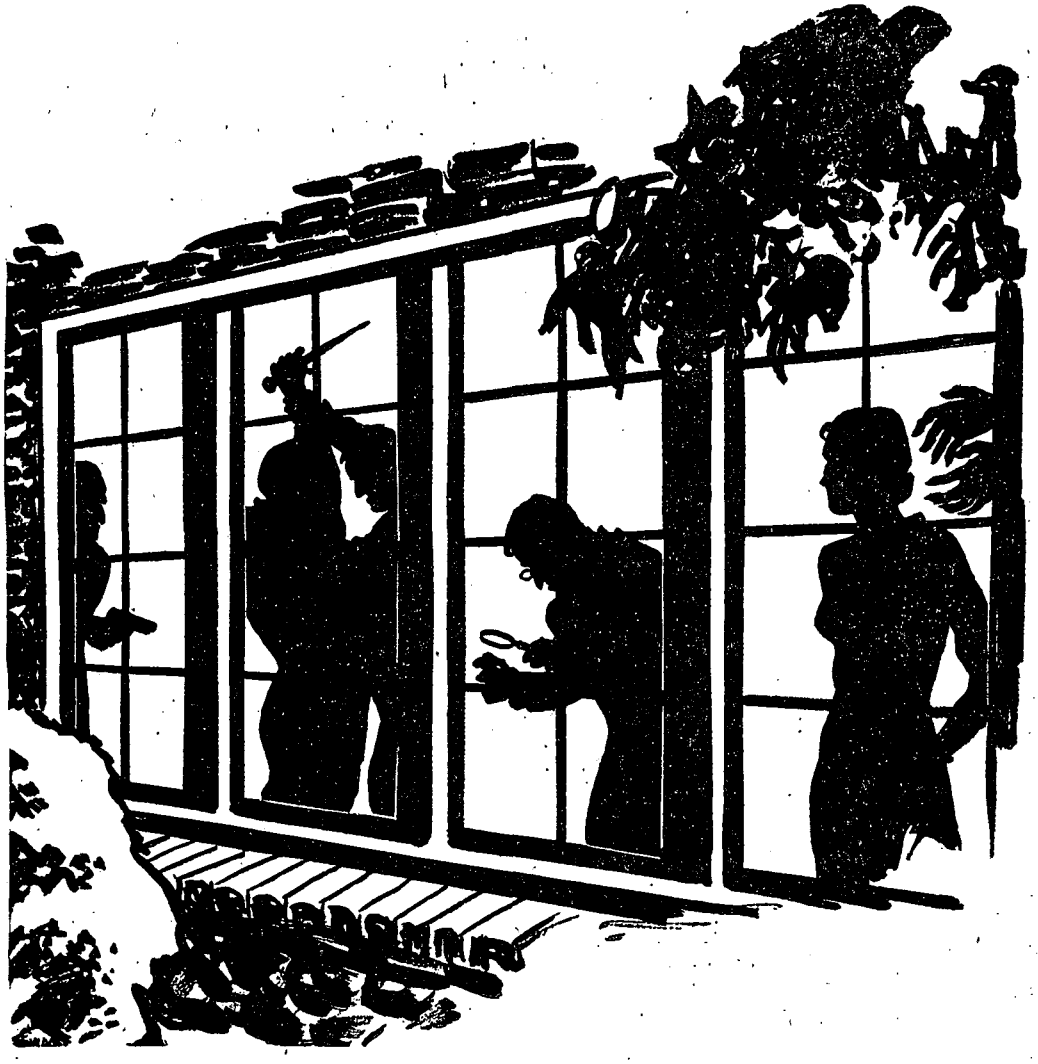

"Oh yes," Stan answered. "So he did. This Chinese general business has its possibilities. I'll think it over."

TWO men lifted Stan to a wheel stretcher and rolled him from the dressing room to the set. Cameras, directors, actors and all that go into the making of a big scene were waiting. The few visitors permitted on the set stared in amazement. Stan Dvorak was never seen out of character, though hundreds knew him as John Stanley, a young man about town with too much money for his own good.

"Where's Gale?" the director demanded. "She should be here now. Stan can't endure too much of this distorted body stuff, you know."

An assistant ran to the star's dressing room and returned a moment later. "She isn't there. Hasn't phoned, either," he reported.

The director swore under his breath and Moe folded his hands behind his back and began pacing the set, muttering under his breath. The squeak of brakes came faintly through the open door and Stan caught a glimpse of Gladys Gale stepping out of her expensive car. She was slightly flushed, but that didn't prevent her from running to her bungalow dressing room. She emerged in almost no time dressed in sports clothes.

"Sorry, Stan," she apologized, "but I'm scared sick over this kidnapping business. The men came this morning to put bars on my windows. I've received five differ-

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ent warnings the last six months, you know."

"Okay, Honey," Stan replied good-naturedly. A powerful gang of snatchers had made several attempts to kidnap different stars and the colony was having the jitters. Stan Dvorak was one of the few who did not worry. No snatcher knew what he looked like and to pick him up it would be necessary to charge the studio gates, but the Government's drive on kidnappers had whetted the public interest and Para-Art, quick to capitalize on a natural, was making Snatchers in record time.

An assistant director walked over to the visitors, mostly exhibitors visiting in Hollywood, and explained the scene.

"Gale's a great actress, understand," he said, "and she has been kidnapped by the half-caste underworld king, Foo Young. The net is closing in. Foo Young is caught with the goods and realizes it. He's taken her across a state line, the Federals are in the play and that means hanging."

"Yes." One of the exhibitors was hanging on every word. Behind his broad forehead was unusual intelligence. Stan Dvorak, studying him, as he did all those who came under his gaze, saw that this man could not only plan, but execute. He would think quickly and act instinctively. Nine times in ten his hunches would be right.

"Cold, hard eyes, too," Stan mused. "I'll bet he makes money in good times and bad. In his business deals I'll lay two to one he gets his pound of flesh." Stan's gaze lingered on the man's blue eyes a long time. He would never forget them, nor the evenly spaced teeth, which were shorter than normal. And he would remember, too, the thin, cruel lips. Some day the worst in this man would go into one of Dvorak's amazing make-ups. He turned to a scrip girl and whispered, "Get his name for me, will you?"

"Jim Henderson, a big exhibitor from Seattle—owns a chain of little theaters," the girl answered.

The assistant director's voice continued: "Trapped, Foo Young strangles Gale, while the Federal dicks are chopping through steel doors. You'll get what follows," he concluded.

JIM HENDERSON sat on the edge of his chair while they rehearsed, and when the cameras and sound apparatus went into action, the man was almost rigid. His cold eyes blazed with interest.

Men out of range of the set began a pounding which would register hammer blows breaking through steel doors. A Chinese servant entered hastily and spoke to Foo Young. He disappeared and returned with Gladys Gale screaming and fighting. Foo Young's twisted body writhed; he turned slanting, calculating eyes on the doors, then suddenly his claw-like hand flashed from the sleeve of his yellow, silken robe.

The fingers fastened on Gale's throat. No word came from Foo Young; no movement, save the shaking of his arm as Gale struggled in his terrible grasp. Slowly she relaxed, then went limp, but still he hung on until assured life was extinct. He released his grasp and the body slipped several inches, then lay without motion, the head resting on the girl's mass of golden hair.

Several times the scene was taken, then the assistant director said to Henderson, "That's all for the present, Stan Dvorak will rest half an hour, then continue. Perhaps you would like to see more of the studio?"

"I'd like to know what Foo Young does with the body," Henderson answered. "That's a wow of a scene. It had me right on the edge of my chair. What'd he do with the body?"

"Here," the other replied, "glance over the script if you like."

Henderson watched them wheel Stan Dvorak to his dressing room, then he read the script for several minutes. "This just

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about concludes the picture, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Oh no, the sequences are not taken in the order of their appearance on the screen," the assistant explained. "We keep Stan pretty busy, and shoot scenes when most convenient. The shots in which Gale is snatched will be taken next week, near the Kelso estate on the boulevard. If you're in town——"

"Thanks, I'm afraid I'll be on my way home then," Henderson replied. He sauntered about the studio for perhaps half an hour longer, then accompanied by a swarthy man with nervous, beady eyes stepped into a car bearing a Washington license and left the grounds.

NO WORD was exchanged between these two for several moments, then Henderson said, "We've found the way to snatch Gladys Gale. No chance of breaking into her home; it's too well guarded with men packing tommy guns, Marcotti."

"And the windows are now barred," Marcotti added. "She's guarded all the way to the studio, too, so——?"

"So when the snatching shots are taken near the Kelso estate we'll be on the job and turn it into a real snatching," Henderson answered. He stopped at a turn in the road and replaced the Washington license plates with a pair of California's.

"She ought to be worth a hundred grand on the basis of a quick turn-over. The papers will be full of it, naturally," Marcotti reasoned, "and the Federal hounds will be on our tails, with all the rest."

"Not if we put it up to Ganz that if we're crowded it's the end of Gale," Henderson retorted. "He's got influence enough to tie every dick's hands tight."

"And if we are trapped, we know what to do with the body," Marcotti significantly observed.

"Yeah, the script told us that," Henderson answered.

There followed another period of silence as the car rolled towards the gang's hangout in Los Angeles. "A hundred grand," Marcotti presently complained. "It's beer money, if you know what I mean."

"You're thinking of Stan Dvorak?" Henderson suggested.

"Ganz would pay a million for him, and no questions asked," Marcotti argued.

"He never works outside of the studio walls," Henderson answered. "I've thought

of that a lot. Para-Art claims no man has ever seen him, as Dvorak, out of character. He may have been seen as John Smith, but not as Dvorak. It adds mystery and that's *box office*. But Moe Ganz is smart. Maybe keeping him inside the walls is another way of avoiding a snatch that'd cost him plenty."

CHAPTER II

NOT IN THE SCRIPT

A DETOUR sign kept the boulevard free of traffic near the Kelso estate. Galdys Gale sat in her own car, dressed in the same sports clothing she had worn when the shots were taken in Foo Young's hide-out. She was all ready when the cameras were.

An expensive car—an open job—rolled slowly down the drive and stopped opposite the star's. "Hello, Gladys," Stan Dvorak said; "thought I'd come down and watch them snatch you."

"Not working today, eh?" she answered.

"No, went to a tong meeting last night," he answered. "I'm ahead of schedule and Moe told me to take a day off."

"So like the postman who went for a walk, you've come out to watch them take motion pictures," she said gaily. "What

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a delightful life you live. Stan Dvorak, man of mystery; John Stanley man about town with all of the girls throwing themselves at you."

"I haven't noticed anything like that," Stan replied. "Let's talk about you, Gladys. You didn't sleep well last night, did you?"

"Snatchers," she answered. "I suppose I'm silly, but this picture is getting me down. I *have* received warnings and——"

"Cranks," Dvorak answered shortly.

"But I'm told the Doremus crowd is working in Southern California. It got too hot for them in the East. Four successful kidnappings and not a conviction," she said. He saw she was working herself into a nervous state which might prove dangerous in view of the hazardous driving ahead of her.

"Just rumors," he insisted. "Come, hop in with me," he urged on a sudden impulse. "They won't be shooting for five minutes yet and there's a little drugstore half a mile away."

Stan drove rapidly to the drugstore and the two of them crowded into the telephone booth. He called police headquarters and asked for Captain of Detectives O'Grady. "This is Dvorak," he said. "Gladys Gale's all steamed up over the Doremus crowd. Tell her the low-down. I'm placing the receiver against her shell-like ear."

O'Grady's hearty voice came over the wire. "Forget it, Miss Gale. It's never been quieter. Uncle Sam's thrown too big a scare into 'em and the rats have hunted their holes."

"Thank you so much," the girl answered. "I've really worried a lot."

"Don't mention it. Let me talk to Stan again. I think he can help me on a Chinatown job through his tong," O'Grady said.

SHE turned the receiver over to Dvorak and again O'Grady's voice came, this time lower. "Is that dame in the booth with you?"

"No, she just stepped outside. What about Chinatown?"

"A stall. Listen. Doremus and his whole crowd's here. We're trying to put the finger on 'em, but nobody's seen Doremus so we don't know what he looks like. It's just a tip, that's all, but a hot one," O'Grady explained.

"The hell you say?" Stan replied. "Say, if anything breaks let me in on it?"

"You? Not much. You'd be worth a million bucks in their hands. No chance, Stan. Good-by and watch your step!" O'Grady hung up.

Gladys Gale was waiting in the car. "What'd he want? You'll get mixed up in some kind of a Chinatown mess I suppose and poor old Moe will have a fit."

"I'll be careful," Dvorak promised, but he was thinking Moe Ganz would have several fits if he knew what O'Grady had just told him.

For the moment at least Gladys Gale had stopped worrying. She would give her best, which was as good as anybody's best, and the picture would not suffer.

The director was fuming when they returned, but calmed down when Dvorak informed him of the purpose of the ride. "Thank God for that," the man exclaimed. "Now Gale can put her mind on her work. I suppose you heard the rumor about the Doremus mob being in the city?"

"Sure!"

"Lucky dog, Stan. Your face isn't known." He walked off to begin the morning's work.

GLADYS GALE drove into the Kelso grounds, turned around and started towards the boulevard. She looked very sweet as the cameras caught her leaving her estate. She continued to look sweet until the rear vision mirror showed a car coming behind her at a rapid pace. Annoyance flashed over her face and she stepped on the gas. The car drew abreast, cut in, and only by a miracle did she avert a crash. Men poured from the offending sedan, and one of them covered her with a tommy gun. Others caught her up and hurled her into the car. With a roar it

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was gone. A hundred yards away it stopped and backed up.

"Good," the director said, "but not good enough. Go way up the boulevard and get your car to rolling. Gale must first be attracted by your unusual speed. She swings over, *then* you cut in. You jam on the brakes. We'll take care of the moaning rubber later, Red."

"Okay," Red answered, turning around with his load of made-up mugs. He ran up the boulevard, turned and found himself almost running down a small delivery wagon. "What the hell?" he began, then things happened so swiftly, he found it difficult later on to relate them in their sequence.

The driver covered him with a submachine gun, masked men, well armed, poured out of the delivery truck and swarmed over Red's car. His own tough mugs with their empty weapons, hadn't a chance and knew it. They raised their hands high and jumped to obey orders.

Jim Henderson, known in underworld circles as Doremus, jumped to the wheel of the studio car and in one swift glance saw that the gasoline supply was ample. He started the car rolling down the boulevard at the approximate speed Red had used in the rehearsal which he had witnessed through binoculars from a nearby street.

Gladys Gale's car cut across the boulevard and he saw the girl suddenly look back. Cameras were grinding from points of vantage. Doremus speeded up and cut in so sharply in front of the girl that she crashed into his bumper.

"What the hell's the matter with Red?" the director growled.

"Gale's cracked her head against the windshield and she's out," Stan Dvorak shouted. He and the others held their places, for the cameras were getting everything.

"Say!" It was Stan's voice again. "That isn't Red, that's some—— Hey, this is a real snatch!"

A machine gun swung around to cover them, and let go a burst as Stan dived over a stone wall. The director and two standing near him dropped flat on their faces. Only the fact that the gunner was trying to bring down Dvorak saved them.

Gladys Gale aroused from her momentary stupor looked into Doremus's face, and screamed. "Shut up," the man snarled, "This is the real stuff. Behave yourself and nothing will happen. We want a hundred grand, not you."

He tossed her roughly into the studio car and said, "Marcotti, take the wheel. Keep her rolling." He jumped into the back seat, caught up a gun and covered his men's retreat. The car leaped forward, dragged Gladys Gale's car several yards, then the bumper tore off and they roared ahead.

THE instant it was safe to show himself Stan Dvorak ran to his own car. The studio car he knew would do eighty-five. His was good for a hundred and twenty, and it could take corners faster.

"For God's sake, Stan, don't go after them! You'll be smeared," the director yelled. "Think of your contract! Think of Moe. Gale's bad enough. We can't lose you, too."

"Bullet proof windshield glass," Stan yelled. "Had it put in a week ago! I'll keep 'em in sight. Phone O'Grady!" Then he was gone, his wheels fairly smoking. The roar of the powerful motor reached a high crescendo, then slackened briefly as he went into the first curve. Rubber screamed and moaned and someone yelled, "He's turning over."

But he didn't. The car skidded violently, then Dvorak straightened it out and pushed his foot down to the board. The studio car was five blocks ahead. Dvorak's car began eating up the distance, taking great gulps of space at a time.

He saw the ugly snout of a machine gun break through the rear window of the car ahead, then a burst came. Bullets droned about the car and a spare tire let go with a loud report. Instinctively he winced as

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the gunner got the range and poured nickel against the windshield. "Wow!" he shouted. "That *is* a relief. Wasn't sure whether that glass would stand up or not."

He could imagine the gunner's amazement as the pursuing car came on despite the repeated bursts from his weapon. Bullets began eating up the pavement as he lowered his gun and aimed at Dvorak's tires. At that speed accuracy was next to impossible.

Dvorak slackened pace slightly. He wanted to keep the car in sight. To close in meant death. He had an automatic pistol in one of the car pockets—a futile weapon against the arsenal Doremus carried.

Finding they could not run away from Dvorak's car, nor stop it, the driver turned a corner, then a second and third in an effort to shake him off. Dvorak lost sight of his quarry, but he had no trouble following. Rubber marks on the pavement pointed out each turn.

The fifth corner revealed the studio car roaring down a narrow road. It swerved to pass an oncoming delivery truck, then the gunner, with devilish ingenuity turned his weapon on the truck's helpless driver.

Dvorak saw the unfortunate man slump behind his wheel and the next instant the truck was in his path. He slammed on the brakes as much as he dared, swerved and leaped a sidewalk, flattened out a row of young trees and came to a stop in an open field.

Dvorak jumped out and checked on the damage—two blown tires, steering gear out of alignment, and a bullet riddled radiator. Steam was hissing from several punctures. "They shook me off," he complained bitterly, "and they had to murder a poor devil to do it. I'd hoped to stay with 'em until a broadcast started the prowler cars in action."

He ran back to the delivery truck which had gone into the ditch. The driver was dead, he saw that at a glance, and the truck was in no condition to continue the pursuit. People were running towards him from a nearby home. "What's it all about?" a man yelled.

Dvorak cupped his hands to his lips and bellowed, "Get in touch with O'Grady at police headquarters. Tell him John Stanley trailed the Gale snatchers to this point. They were headed northwest the last he saw. Run!"

The man turned and ran towards the house, muttering, "John Stanley, huh? Man-about-town seems to have found something to do at last!"

Stan Dvorak seated himself on the truck. There was nothing to do but wait until the police arrived. "Plenty happened in this sequence that wasn't in the script," he muttered. "It's going to be tough on Gale. But she'll be safe unless the police close in and it's her life or the gang's."

Chapter III

INSIDE JOB

IT WAS twenty minutes before moaning sirens announced the approach of the police. O'Grady hopped out of a bureau of investigation car and hurried up to Dvorak. "All right, Stan?" he asked.

"Yes, but remember, O'Grady, I'm John Stanley, not Stan Dvorak," the character actor warned. The captain of detectives already knew his identity, but Stan hoped

to avoid identification by others if possible.

"They abandoned the studio car a mile from here," O'Grady said. "Not only that, they shot some poor devil who no doubt was wondering what it was all about."

"Dead men tell no tales, eh?" Dvorak

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observed. "I suppose they had the get-away car parked near."

"Sure, and with the only man who could describe it dead, we were blocked right at the start," O'Grady answered. "Every police car in the district is on the lookout for a car with a girl wearing make-up in it. Every crossing man has order to search the cars as they stop for the signal light."

"It sounds simple, but Doremus will trickle through, he always does," Dvorak said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Keep out of it," O'Grady answered. "If Doremus gets his hands on you we'll have a mental case and his name will be Moe Ganz."

Dvorak jumped into O'Grady's car; a man was left with the truck driver's remains, and the others returned to the scene of the kidnapping with the detective captain.

Moe Ganz had arrived by that time. He was pacing back and forth throwing up his hands in despair. The sight of Dvorak only increased his agitation. "With tears in my eyes I esk you to go home, Stan, and hide," he cried. "On my bended knees I esk it. A hundred grand they want for Gale. For you?" He threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. "More money than there is!"

"Don't worry, Moe, I'm John Stanley," Dvorak assured him.

He joined the group about O'Grady. The director was saying, "They knew exactly what we were going to do. Somehow they had advance information."

"An inside job, eh?" O'Grady mused. "Well, who do you suspect?"

"That's just it," the director groaned, "who could I suspect? We've been together a long time. I'd trust any one of 'em——"

"Here's an envelope I found near Gale's car," an assistant director said, hurrying up.

"Handle it carefully," O'Grady warned, "there may be fingerprints on it, but not likely." He read aloud:

"Para-Art:

Gale is safe unless you double-cross us. We want a hundred grand in hundred dollar bills—new bills. The police will know about the snatching, but if they know about any information we send you within the next ten days it will be just too bad."

Dvorak looked at the note. Words had been clipped from newspapers and pasted on. Thus there were neither typewriter impressions, nor tricks of handwriting to betray them. "Damned clever, if you ask me," Dvorak said. "Well, I think I'll go home. Ring me if there's anything I could do."

"Going home?" Ganz queried. "I wish I could believe that."

STAN DVORAK went to the quarters occupied by John Stanley, man-about-town. The elevator boys treated him with respect; the bell hops nodded pleasantly, even the credit man was cordial. Had he heard about the unfortunate kidnapping of Gladys Gale? He had. He was friendly with Miss Gale was he not? Knew her real well. He was and did.

"Inside job," he muttered when he was alone, tossing his hat onto a chair and sprawling out on a day bed. "Of course our gang is out of it. Some outsiders got into the studio and found out what we planned." He got up and began pacing the room, mentally checking over every visitor he had seen on the set. "They all looked the same—interested, even bewildered. Nothing unusual about any of them —— hold on! There was one fellow. Jim Henderson, he was different, and he asked a hell of a lot of questions the average exhibitor would never think of asking. There was a swarthy gent with him who didn't say much, but he missed nothing. Hmmmm. Now I wonder—nonsense, I saw 'em drive away in a Washington car, so that's out. Still——"

Dvorak picked up the telephone and called the operator. "Get Mr. Jim Henderson, the motion picture exhibitor.

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in Seattle for me. It's important. Thank you, I'll stand by for the call."

"Thank you, Mr. Stanley," the girl answered.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Suddenly the bell rang. "Here's your party, Mr. Stanley."

"Thank you. Hello, Mr. Henderson?"

"Yes, what is it?"

Dvorak was confident the operator was too busy to listen in and decided to reveal his identity. "This is Stan Dvorak speaking."

"Oh yes, Mr. Dvorak. We've had a great run on your last picture. You certainly were great."

"Thank you. Now listen. Gale has been kidnapped by the Doremus gang. You know there is no picture of Doremus of record; nor fingerprints. Naturally the police don't know whom to look for," Dvorak explained. "I want to ask you a question."

"Gale kidnapped? Good heavens! Go ahead, Dvorak, what is it you want to know?" Henderson asked.

"Did you visit the studio recently?"

"No. I haven't been out of Seattle for nearly a year," Henderson assured him.

"Nor your associate exhibitors?"

"No."

"A man representing himself to be you spent some time at the studio and was shown about," Dvorak explained. "Have you a rather broad, intelligent forehead, keen blue eyes, black hair, and do you weigh, roughly a hundred and seventy-five pounds? And are you about six feet tall?"

"That is a fairly accurate description," Henderson answered.

"Then Doremus or one of his men impersonated you and I know who to look for," Dvorak answered. He thanked Henderson and hung up the receiver.

Ordering out his second car, Dvorak drove out to the studio and hunted up a photographer. "You took stills that day Henderson visited the set, didn't you?" he asked.

"Sure, with you."

"Good. Get me one of them." He picked up the telephone and found O'Grady at headquarters directing the hunt. The city fairly seethed. "I'm bringing a picture of a man who impersonated one of our exhibitors some time ago," he said. "I think it's Doremus."

"Thanks, Stan, but damn it to hell, I thought you went home! Keep out of this. If you don't, I'll throw you in the can until it's all over," O'Grady fumed.

As Dvorak hung up the receiver, the photographer returned. "Ain't that hell?" he asked tossing a group photograph down before the actor.

As Foo Young, the likeness was excellent; so was Gale's attractive features. Moe Ganz, was smiling as usual, but Henderson had turned his head and exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke just as the camera clicked. His features and those of Marcotti were badly blurred.

DVORAK carried the photograph down to headquarters. "This isn't much help," he said dejectedly, "but it proves one thing, the man posing as Henderson is our man. Otherwise he wouldn't have taken so much trouble to ruin a picture. Let me look through your mug books."

"Help yourself," O'Grady replied. "You're safe enough there. I'll see what can be done with this. Gale's mother is just about frantic and we're getting nowhere."

"You've got plenty of company," Dvorak replied; "no department yet has put a finger on Doremus."

Dvorak spent hours looking at photographs but found none that resembled the man he presumed was Doremus. A week passed without incident. No word came from the snatchers. Moe Ganz ordered the picture finished up without Gladys Gale. He realized if released while the snatching was a sensation, "Snatchers" would make a barrel of money. He proposed to use as much of that money as necessary to insure his star's safe return.

Ten days! And the silence continued.

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Dvorak, sitting in his apartment smoking, suddenly dashed his cigarette into a waste basked. "Damn it, I've kept quiet long enough," he growled. "We're getting nowhere fast. I'm going to take a long chance." He picked up the telephone and called the newspaper offices. "Send a good leg man up," he requested. "I've got a story. It's on the Gale kidnapping."

An hour later he faced a group of interested men. "Gale and I were very close," he said.

"Sweethearts?"

"Yes!"

"Engaged?" one asked.

"Such announcements usually come from the lady," Dvorak answered, "but under the circumstances you may say John Stanley stated an engagement existed between Glady Gale and himself. I stand ready to pay one hundred thousand dollars whenever and wherever those holding Miss Gale direct. I promise there will be no police interference. My only thought is for Gladys's safety. I am, gentlemen, frantic."

"Is that all?"

"That covers it, I believe," Dvorak answered.

By evening headlines carried John Stanley's offer, and adept writers had written a colorful and romantic story about the man-about-town and the motion picture star.

"Gladys is going to be surprised when she hears it," Dvorak mused. "So are a lot of others."

O'Grady was the first to appear. He slammed the paper down. "What the hell are you up to?" he demanded.

"Obtaining the girl's release, naturally," Dvorak answered. "Her mother is a nervous wreck. I don't blame her. Not a word. Listen, Doremus is afraid of you, but John Stanley, play-boy, is regarded as pretty much of a sap. There never was a man yet who didn't make a slip. Doremus is no exception."

"So what?"

"What!" was Dvorak's unsatisfactory answer. The telephone crashed in. "That would be Moe Ganz, with tears in his eyes and on bended knees."

IT WAS. Dvorak's soothing voice would have talked a prohibitionist into attending a cocktail party, but it left Moe unsatisfied. "I'll have O'Grady arrest you," he threatened.

"On what grounds?" Dvorak asked with maddening cheerfulness.

"Because you're a lunatic," Ganz fumed.

"Then I'll prove my sanity, if possible," the actor returned.

"Listen, Stan. I'm an old man. I've got a bad heart. The doctor says I shouldn't worry or have excitement. On bended knees I esk you, lay off this kidnapping business. Take a vacation at company expense," Ganz wailed. "Go to Europe; around the world, anything, but don't gum-shoe after this Doremus. Sooner I would rather have you with Byrd at the South Pole."

Five minutes later Stan was able to hang up. "Let's hear your plan," O'Grady said.

"Briefly, it's this. Doremus is afraid

to contact the average person. He knows the dicks are likely to be on the trail, but he may take a chance on John Stanley, man-about-town. He'll think he's a sap," Dvorak explained.

"And be a hundred percent right," O'Grady said with feeling. "Go on."

"That's all. He contacts me, I pay the money, Gale's turned loose and the rest is up to you," Dvorak airily concluded.

"That's all, eh?" O'Grady jeered. "Stan you're a damned liar. You're more. You're an uhh uhh liar. I'm going to take

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steps to save your worthless hide—I kinda like you."

He left Dvorak and gave orders to have the telephone wire tapped. "He ain't foolin' me none," O'Grady complained. "He's got some crazy idea of impersonating somebody with his make-up and capturing Doremus, single-handed. His makeup, and his Chink tong affiliations won't help him any when he tangles with that mob."

"You're right there, O'Grady," a fellow officer agreed. "Some of the biggest Federals are on the job. That's what they think of Doremus."

Chapter IV

CONTACT

STAN DVORAK wasn't far from the telephone for the next week. The moment he left the studio, he returned to his apartments, studied the situation and planned to match wits with Doremus if he got an opportunity.

When the call did come, it was shortly before six o'clock in the evening. "Stanley?" The voice was terse, demanding, but Dvorak had heard it before. It was the man who had claimed to be Jim Henderson.

"Listen," Dvorak cut in sharply. "If it's about Gale, hang up and call me in two minutes at—" He paused briefly and gave a telephone number. "It's a public telephone. This wire's tapped."

The answer was a click. "And that's answer enough for me," Dvorak exclaimed. He avoided the elevator and ran down the stairs to the second floor, raced down a hall, then descended to the alley on a fire escape. If O'Grady had tapped the telephone, as he expected; and if he had also detailed a man to trail him, as was probable, Dvorak hoped he had eluded that worthy.

He walked swiftly to a public telephone located in a drug stare half a block from his apartments. The booth was empty and as he stepped in, the bell rang. He answered. "Stanley," he said.

"Good! I'm talking from a public telephone too," came Henderson's voice. "Men have been caught at that, so I'll talk fast. You listen. Iowa picnic, and bring your lunch. Understand—your lunch." The other hung up.

"Bring my lunch, eh?" Dvorak mused. "I didn't know there was an Iowa picnic. Queer, too, I used to live in Iowa." He walked slowly down the street, pondering. The fact Doremus knew he had once lived in the state was proof of the man's attention to detail.

Stan checked up, found there was to be a picnic for Iowans, learned at what hour and the location and returned to his apartments. O'Grady was waiting. "You contacted him, eh?" he demanded.

"Doremus called, and thinking of Gale's safety, I warned him the line was probably tapped. I gave him a number to call, went there and waited," Dvorak answered. "Call off your men, O'Grady, and give me a break on this."

O'Grady trying to fathom Dvorak's plans neglected to ask him if Doremus had called the second number, which was exactly what the actor intended. He did not want to be put in the position of lying to a good friend.

"No chance," O'Grady growled. "We're going to stick to you like brothers. Orders from Para-Art."

THE day of the Iowa picnic Dvorak resorted to make-up to elude O'Grady's men. He walked past the detective detailed to trail him, rented a cheap Drive-Yourself car and joined the former Iowans. Cars were pouring in from every highway; perspiring patrolmen were directing traffic; acquaintances chancing to see each other, yelled back and forth. Dvorak wondered how Doremus's man would pick him from among the thousands.

He had removed the make-up on eluding the detective, but even John Stanley's features at best were merely another face. Dvorak parked his car, and lifted his basket from a snug place near his feet,

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then began wandering around. The basket contained a hundred thousand dollars, packed under a picnic lunch.

An hour passed without incident, and then a ruddy-faced individual with a brisk manner stepped up, grinned and extended his hand. "Well, well, John!" he exclaimed, while those around beamed their approval. "Didn't expect to see you out here."

Dvorak shook hands. "I'm John Stanley, in the flesh," he said, matching the other's mood. "I brought my—er—lunch along. Plan to make a day of it."

"I came off in a hurry," the other said. His eyes narrowed. "Got enough for two?"

"Sure. Come along, we'll start in," Dvorak answered.

The man's genial expression remained, but the tone of his voice changed. "You got that hundred grand?" he demanded.

"Sure, but how do I know you're from Doremus, Mr.—er—?" Dvorak hesitated.

"Call me Hank," the man said. "And you don't need to be afraid some other mob's going to cut in on the chief's game. That happened just once—just once."

"I believe I did read something about someone cutting in and taking the ransom money right from under Doremus's nose," Dvorak said. "The mob was a hundred percent write-off after Doremus got through with them. What are your orders?"

"Sure O'Grady hasn't got a dick trailing you?" Hank asked.

"No. But I'm sure of this, I did everything possible to shake anyone off," Dvorak assured him.

"God help anybody that's shadowing you, Stanley and—God help you if they are. You go first, with a burst that'll cut you in two. Every Tommy man in the mob is looking after me today," Hank warned.

"I'm obeying orders," Dvorak answered. "I'm only interested in my fiancée's release. How is she?"

"She's a cool one," Hank informed him. "Wasn't scared and hasn't given us any trouble." He helped himself to a sandwich, and ate it with evident relish while his eyes roved the vicinity.

"Let's get going," Dvorak urged.

"It wouldn't look natural to quit a picnic—such slips attract attention," Hank explained. He ate two more sandwiches, but Dvorak was too eager to take the next step to enjoy a lunch. He forced the food down, however and managed to sing,

"Iowa! Iowa! Io Iowaaaa. Io Iowaaaa.
"Iowa! Iowa! That's where the tall corn grows."

Hank drew out a cob pipe and smoked it. "Let's walk around and see the folks," he grimly suggested. "Bring your basket."

FIFTEEN minutes later Hank opened a sedan door and said, "Get in, Stanley!"

Dvorak seated himself in front with the basket in his lap. Hank took the basket and dropped it in back. "It'll be safe there."

They drove slowly through the traffic and onto a boulevard. "Now get in back," Hank said when they were in the country, "and lay flat on your stomach." He drove perhaps a mile before he stopped, leaned over the back of the seat and taped Dvorak's eyes. Driving was resumed, at a somewhat faster pace. Dvorak knew Hank was turning a number of corners by the roll of his body. The pace was moderate at all times, though the actor guessed that under the cowl a motor throbbed that was capable of doing around a hundred miles an hour.

Suddenly the sound of the exhaust changed. "Going through a tunnel," Dvorak muttered, then the motor died and he knew Hank must have driven into a garage.

"Come on out," Hank directed.

The tape was removed and he found himself in a four-car garage. The doors were solid and it was impossible to catch a glimpse of the surrounding grounds. The finish, however was expensive, the knobs, hinges and other hardware on the doors was manufactured of bronze.

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A DOOR admitted them into a hall, which led to a brilliantly lighted room. Gladys Gale, heavily guarded, was sitting in a richly upholstered chair. She dropped a magazine she had been reading and rushed into Dvorak's arms. "Oh, John! John!" she cried. "I knew you'd come. I knew you wouldn't fail me. Oh, my darling!" She kissed his cheek and ear, at the same time whispering, "You mug, act like you were in love with me. The papers have been full of your devotion."

"It isn't at all hard to do," he whispered, crushing her in his embrace. Then they seated themselves.

"Mr. Doremus," the girl said. "One of our Seattle exhibitors. I met him informally on the set as Jim Henderson," she added in an ironic tone.

"You have the money?" Doremus sharply demanded.

Dvorak removed several sheets of wax paper from the bottom of the lunch basket revealing a layer of new bills. "There you are—a hundred grand," he answered.

Doremus counted them carefully. "And you needn't worry," Dvorak said, "I made no record of the numbers."

"It doesn't matter. We change them, through a special process," Doremus replied. He looked at Gladys Gale. "Your eyes will be taped, Miss Gale," he continued, "and my men will leave you in a safe place. Count one thousand, slowly, then remove the tape."

"Yes," the girl said. Her relief was obvious and for a moment she seemed about to break, then the iron nerve which had enabled her to endure the ordeal calmly, returned. "My fiancé will be with me, of course," she added, "and we'll manage."

"On the contrary," Doremus said in a hard voice. "Your fiancé will remain until we have been paid for his release."

"Why you double-crossing——" the girl began in an angry tone.

Doremus held up an admonishing hand. "I've double-crossed no one," he said sharply. "I offered to release you safely if one hundred thousand dollars was paid. It has been paid, and you are to be released. Mr. Stanley, is—ah—shall we say another transaction?"

The girl realized her helplessness and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, what's the price?" she asked.

"A wealthy young man-about-town perhaps is of small value to society," Doremus blandly suggested, "but to himself, or his fiancée he should be worth say another hundred thousand dollars?"

"I don't know where it is coming from," Dvorak said, "I strained my credit to the limit to raise the present ransom."

"That is indeed unfortunate for you," and there was murder in Doremus's voice and eyes as he made the statement. He then turned to Gladys Gale. "Possibly Para-Art rather than witness their star's anguish might advance the sum?"

"I'll see what I can do," the girl said. She walked over to Dvorak, but he pushed her aside.

"Damn you, Doremus, I kept my word, threw cops off my trail and did everything possible to——"

"To get Miss Gale's release," Doremus rasped, at the same time one of his men prodded Dvorak in the ribs with a submachine gun. "You weren't thinking of me. I know where I stand, and I'm making the most of it."

Dvorak shrugged his shoulders. "As usual, you win," he confessed. "Well, good-by, Gladys."

They went into a clinch and the girl whispered, "You seem tickled to death."

"I am," he answered. "Tell Moe Ganz not to worry." He watched her disappear towards the garage.

CHAPTER V

FLASH!

MAKE yourself at home, Stanley," Doremus said. "As long as you give us no trouble, or no attempt is made to rescue you by force, you are safe."

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"And if the police should surround the place?"

"They'd find nothing but respectable men enjoying a season in Southern California," Doremus said.

"Of course, there would be a body," Dvorak observed.

Doremus lighted a cigarette, relaxed, smoked several seconds while he studied his man. "It was my good fortune to see them make a part of Para-Art's new picture, 'Snatchers.' I saw Miss Gale, and Dvorak. Later I read a part of the script. The—er snatchers were trapped by the police. It was necessary to dispose of Miss Gale's body. Foo Young, the half-caste did it neatly and in a novel manner."

"Go on."

"I don't want to spoil the picture for you," Doremus grimly replied. "It's a thriller. As I said, make yourself at home. Cigars and cigarettes are on the table, also reading matter, and there's a radio near

the davenport. You may tune in and listen to the reports of police progress in solving the mystery of your disappearance. It really isn't at all bad unless—unless the police crowd us, or your friends are unable to raise the necessary sum for your release."

Dvorak smoked. Men drifted into the room and out again. The actor estimated there were eight in the gang. Five of them were dressed as men of moderate income, the remaining three as servants. All were heavily armed, and one was always on duty with a machine gun in his hands.

Through the haze of his own smoke Dvorak studied Doremus. The radio, tuned low, played a brisk dance number. "According to the newspapers," he presently observed, "it got too hot for you in the East, so you came out here."

Doremus looked up quickly, a contemptuous smile on his lips. "It's never too hot for us, Stanley. We came here for a real job, and couldn't put it over."

"What was that?"

Doremus didn't hesitate. Perhaps he was rather proud of the plan, even if conditions prevented his going through with it. "We came here to snatch Stan Dvorak. And failed because Para-Art never permits him to leave the studio in character. There is no known picture of the man himself, in existence." He knocked the ashes from his cigarette. "He'd have been worth a cool million to us."

"Yes, I guess he would," Stan replied.

HE READ the newspapers and was half through a magazine story when the radio music ended suddenly. Tenseness was evident in the radio announcer's voice. "Flash!" he fairly shouted. "Flash! The Doremus gang has just released Gladys Gale. She telephoned from a small community about twenty minutes ago, saying she was unhurt and requested the studio to send a car for her. Miss Gale reported John Stanley had delivered the ransom money in person, and that he is now being held for a similar sum. Detective Captain O'Grady immediately left to interview Miss Gale."

"Well, well!" Dvorak drawled. "It's an odd sensation to sit here and listen to an account of my own snatching."

"Flash!" It was the announcer's voice again. "Moe Ganz, president of Para-Art was so delighted over Miss Gale's release that he became hysterical. Several nerve specialists were immediately rushed to the studio. It is understood John Stanley is

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a close friend of Mr. Ganz's, and the new kidnapping has affected him adversely. This station will keep its listeners posted."

And the station did just that!

At the end of each program the announcer managed to get in a few words, and the usual period devoted to news reports was turned over to Gladys Gale to tell her story. She related it breathlessly, to an equally breathless audience. She concluded with an encouraging, "John Stanley is doubtless sitting in the same chair I occupied so many nights, listening to the same radio. Don't lose courage, John. Somehow the money will be raised and paid. Don't do anything foolish, please. I beg you, Moe Ganz begs you ——"

"On bended knees with tears in his eyes," Dvorak thought as the girl concluded.

HE READ and listened to the radio until midnight, then he undressed and slept on the davenport. A floor lamp, plugged in behind the sofa shone in his eyes. "How about turning out the lamp?" he asked the guard.

"Okay," the man growled. Several other lights were on. Dvorak grabbed the cord and pulled the plug, instead of getting up and turning off the light. He turned on his side, face to the wall and prepared to sleep. And he did sleep. It was two in the morning when he awakened. Through half lidded eyes he watched the guard. The latter wasn't exactly nodding, but he had relaxed to a point of drowsiness. Dvorak knew the slightest movement would bring him out of it, tense and alert.

Slowly he reached for the light cord. He drew it carefully under the blanket and with thumb nail cut and wore away the insulation. Then he shorted the two wires and carefully pushed the cord back onto the floor.

Dvorak then took stock of the physical set-up of the room. Eight feet from the end of the davenport a door opened into a smaller room which had served as a study for a previous occupant. He guessed the door was unlocked as Doremus had passed through it several times without the use of a key. He knew there was a telephone in the room because he had heard men talking over it.

He was counting on the short circuit and the telephone to aid him, but mostly he depended on the mob's conviction that John Stanley was an easy-going, soft-living individual with little physical courage.

Presently he sat up with a start. "Where the hell am I?" he muttered. The guard was alert instantly, his knuckles whitened as his grasp on the machine gun tightened. "Oh, yes, I remember now." Dvorak rubbed his eyes and reached up and pulled the chain which switched the floor lamp on and off.

"You pulled the plug," the guard said. "It won't light."

"Don't make any difference—just wanted a drink," Dvorak answered. He lurched over to a table, filled a glass with water and drained it. "What time's it?"

"Two o'clock," the guard answered. He took occasion to light a cigarette. Dvorak sat on the edge of the davenport and yawned.

"Might as well plug in again," Dvorak suggested, "then she'll light when I pull the chain. Hooo hummmm!"

He got down on his knees and forced the plug into the socket. Instantly there was a flash of blue flame and the room was plunged in darkness. "What the hell!" the guard yelled. "Doremus! Marcotti!"

"Don't shoot!" Dvorak yelled. "It's just a fuse blown! Just a fuse blown!" He opened the door into the study, picked up the desk telephone and found the wire was long enough for him to carry the instrument to the door. He lifted the receiver and shouted. "For God's sake, man, use your head. It's just a blown fuse, Doremus! Tell this man not to shoot me. Doremus!"

Dvorak heard the operator fairly gasp,

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then being a smart girl, she evidently sensed what was going on. "Bring a flashlight, somebody, before this man shoots me!" he yelled. Then he replaced the receiver, set the instrument down on the desk and stepped back into the big room. He closed the door and crawled behind the davenport. Running his fingers along the wire he located the short, separated the wires, then dropped the cord.

Doremus and Marcotti, with several of their men at their heels came into the room. Electric torches darted about like probing white fingers and centered on Dvorak's prostrate figure. "What're you doing down there?" Doremus demanded.

Dvorak leaning heavily on his histrionic ability sat up, apparently shaking with fright. "I was afraid the guard would think I was trying to make a break," he faltered, "so I flattened out on the floor in case the bullets started to fly. The lights went off. It's probably only a blown plug." He drew out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Another scare like this and you'll have a body on your hands."

ONE of the men disappeared and presently the lights came on. Doremus pulled the chain and the floor lamp glowed. He regarded his prisoner with open suspicion for several moments then spoke sharply to the guard. The latter looked up with sullen eyes. "I risked stickin' my head in a noose figgerin' you'd snatch Stan Dvorak and we'd split a million between us," he complained. "Instead of that——"

"Shut up!" A murderous gleam came into Doremus's eyes and the guard subsided. "Go back to bed and get some sleep, all of you," he ordered. Then he walked over to Dvorak. "And let me again remind you, Stanley, that if anything goes wrong, you die."

"Don't I know it? That's why I yelled bloody murder when the fuse blew," Dvorak answered.

There was no more sleep for him that night. The risk he had taken in reaching the telephone and then getting back into the room while the muzzle of a machine gun swung through the darkness was about as much excitement as he had had for several weeks.

If all went along nicely, the telephone operator would not only inform O'Grady of what had transpired, but someone in the plant department would quickly trace the call to its source. About now O'Grady would be on pins and needles. He would plan, reject the plan, and consider another.

With death staring every member of the mob in the face, O'Grady would reason it would be a fight to the finish. On the other hand Doremus felt secure in his garb of respectability and the fact no finger-print record of himself or any member of his mob existed. He might prefer attempting to bluff it through, shooting it out only as a last resort.

Morning brought the newspapers; noon, the early afternoon editions. There were pictures of John Stanley, Gladys Gale and Moe Ganz. Moe's nervous break-down following Gale's release was good for a column, but the supposed romance between the man-about-town and the motion picture star required several columns. The girl carried out her rôle to perfection. She tried to describe the members of the mob, and otherwise assist O'Grady, and she pleaded for Stanley's life.

There was an editorial or two about police inefficiency. Stan Dvorak was not mentioned.

LATE afternoon brought an electric meter reader to the back door and put the gang on edge. Several men began repairing the pavement in front of the house, from what Dvorak could hear, and this was the subject of considerable conversation. At four o'clock the telephone rang.

Doremus answered and all Dvorak heard was a series of clipped, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" He hung up and called the man who had driven Gladys Gale from the house. "You're sure that girl left no trail?"

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"I know it, chief," the driver insisted in a worried voice. "The doors were shut and she was on the floor of the car. I drove two miles over main boulevards so they couldn't trace back by the tires. What's up?"

"I got a tip, the district is lousy with dicks," Doremus said. "That paving gang don't look right to me, either."

"What's it to be, fight or bluff it through?" Marcotti asked.

"If we fight and get away, they'll find fingerprints and have that much to go on," Doremus reasoned. "We'll bluff, as we've done before, but we'll have the drop on the dicks. If any of them talk of taking us down for questioning, we'll let 'em have it."

"And what about Stanley?"

"We can't be caught with him, or his body," Doremus said. "We'll use Foo Young's trick. Get everything ready. I'm going to saunter around the place and look at my garden and—other things."

Chapter VI

Showdown

MARCOTTI entered the living room, spoke sharply, and two men grabbed Dvorak and hurried him into an adjoining room. He knew what was coming; he knew the story of Snatchers, only too well.

There was no resisting them. He was tripped, thrown and hastily bound. A gag was then thrust into his mouth. "Tie him good," Marcotti ordered. "You Joe, get to work on that wall. Chopper, you come with me."

A canvas was spread on the floor, then Joe began knocking on the wall with a hammer until he found the desired point of attack. He tore aside the plaster and carefully removed the lath. Next he cut a studding leaving a space that would hold a man's body, if stood on his feet.

The debris was removed, except the lath. Doremus hurried in for a brief inspection. Chopper was behind him with several rolls of paper and a bucket of paste. "Work fast, Chopper," Doremus urged. "There's no doubt of it, they're going to pay us a call."

"Must've been a tip-off," Chopper muttered, "the dicks tailed that damned driver, or else——"

"Wrong there, Chopper," Doremus argued, reading his thoughts, "the driver's okay. Likely some neighbor's become suspicious because we've minded our own business."

With Joe's help the evil-eyed Chopper papered the small room with a skill and swiftness of movement that indicated he had served more than an apprenticeship as a paperhanger. They were also apparently using some sort of instantly drying paste. "Come on, Joe," Doremus ordered at last, "get into your chef's uniform and start cooking. Chopper can clean-up here."

"Yeah, all I want is elbow room," Chopper answered.

The others disappeared and Dvorak watched Chopper finish all but the broken

wall area. From the first he had been at work on his bonds. The wrist lashings kept his arms to his sides. There was a purpose in this. If lashed in front or behind, it would have increased the thickness of his body and not only filled the area between the walls, but with back to one wall and hands against the other a strong man might successfully push the wall out.

If Doremus followed the script in

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Snatchers—and this he seemed likely to do in every detail—gagged and bound, Dvorak would be imprisoned between the walls. If all went well he would be brought forth alive to be ransomed at a later date. If the authorities became suspicious and arrested Doremus, then the proof of the mob's guilt would remain walled in until wreckers tore down the house, many years in the future. It was not a pleasant prospect.

DVORAK got a toe against the open door and swung it almost shut, then he dislocated a hip and shoulder and shifted the bonds holding his arms to his body. Suddenly he stopped. Joe had returned. "Need any help, Chopper?" he asked. "Chief wants to know."

"Naw, I'm about through." Chopper continued to work without looking up.

"Chief says for you to get in the hall closet with your tommy gun as soon as you hear the bell ring. He'll answer the bell and take the dick's hat and coat. He won't hang 'em up in the closet. Marcotti will be at the head of the stairs. That covers hall and living room. He'll be behind the palm tub and let 'em have it if the chief gives the signal," Joe explained.

"Nice set-up," Chopper agreed. "I kinda wish they would start something. We'll have 'em between two fires."

"But that don't collect no thousand dollar bills for John Stanley. No, Chief says we're going to be polite and show 'em around from cellar to garret, which will mean some shifting around on our part, but we've done it before," Joe said.

He hurried off and Dvorak threw his dislocated joints into their sockets once more and his hands were free. He waited until Chopper was within reach, then he lashed out with his heels. The man dropped without a cry. Dvorak fairly swarmed over him. First he gagged Chopper, then he removed his coat, trousers, shirt, tie and shoes. He dressed swiftly in the man's clothing and pulled the sole from the bottom of his own right shoe. Smeared between the soles was a quantity of make-up. With the aid of a pocket mirror Dvorak made himself up to resemble Chopper.

If any of the mob gave him even the most casual glance the deception would be instantly noted. Dvorak was relying on the tenseness of the situation to get him by for the moment. He bound Chopper, stood him between the walls and nailed several strips of lath across to hold him in place. He thrust his own clothing around the man as he heard Doremus's voice in the living room. He sensed, rather than saw the man behind him. "Okay?" Doremus asked.

"'Bout!" Dvorak answered, pounding with a hammer to help disguise his voice.

Doremus briefly regarded the other's back, bent to fast labor, then he continued the check. Everything must appear normal, the men chatting and smoking, with perhaps the radio on. He left feeling confident Chopper would leave no loose ends to arouse suspicion.

Dvorak tacked a piece of beaver board across the hole, smeared the wall paper Chopper had prepared for the spot, then plastered the paper in place. It was not the best job in the world. Gobs of paste persisted in gathering under the paper and giving it a lumpy finish, but the pattern matched.

He set the paste bucket and a few odds and ends in a closet, then opened the window to air the room. For one fleeting moment there was an impulse to slip through the window and make a break for freedom. In justice to Moe Ganz he should have done so. On the other hand, if he remained and played out the hand, the entire band might be caught without loss of life.

He stood by the door a moment and listened. The living room was empty. He crossed it in several swift strides and entered the closet just off the hall. A tommy gun lay conveniently on the top shelf. Dvorak turned on the closet light, examined the weapon and got it ready for business. Then he switched off the light.

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Somewhere a bell rang. Instantly feet began to move.

DVORAK heard someone seat himself near the radio and turn a knob. A classical aria ended and an announcer's voice came distinctly. "In answer to the hundreds of telephone calls this studio has received, there are no new developments in the Stanley abduction case. The very silence at the police department suggests activity. The moment anything breaks our listeners will be informed."

A mobster dressed as a butler entered the living room with a tray. There was a tinkle of ice in a frosty glass. "That reminds me," Dvorak thought, "I could go for a drink in a big way about now."

"All set, Chopper?" Doremus's whispered voice asked.

"Okay, Chief," Dvorak responded.

Then he heard the door open and Doremus say, "How do you do?"

"I'm Detective-Captain O'Grady," came the familiar voice. "Sorry to interrupt what looks like a pleasant gathering of friends, but we got a tip the Doremus kidnapping gang was in this neighborhood. We're going through each house——"

"My name is Harrington, Captain," Doremus said. "Come in and look around. Perhaps under different circumstances I would resent this, but I've little sympathy for kidnappers. You must be thorough, of course."

There was rustle of clothing and Dvorak grinned as he pictured half a dozen of the department's biggest dicks, bumping shoulders as they crowded into the narrow entry hall. "I'll take your hats, gentlemen," Doremus said. He spoke sharply to the butler. "Bring six more drinks, please."

"Thanks just the same," O'Grady answered, "but we're working against time."

DVORAK opened the door a trifle. He saw Marcotti crouched behind the palm at the head of the stairs, ready to fire or retreat as the situation demanded. The others had stopped their reading and were watching the detectives. Doremus followed O'Grady from room to room on the lower floor. Each time they returned to the living room. "What've you got here, Mr. Harrington?" O'Grady asked.

"We're having the house done over," Doremus said. "We like the country and have decided to stay awhile. The paperhanger just finished up that room about an hour ago."

O'Grady opened the closet door and looked briefly at the paste bucket. Then he slapped the wall with the palm of his hand. "Not a very good craftsman is he?" he drawled. "Left the paste in lumps."

"It won't be long now," Dvorak muttered. He could feel everyone grow tense. Marcotti thrust his weapon slightly forward. Those he couldn't get, he was doubtless thinking, Chopper would. Not a dick would leave that house alive.

The sound of good plaster echoed to every impact of O'Grady's big hand. But suddenly it changed as he struck the beaver board. "What's here?" he asked.

"Wall, I presume," Doremus answered. "I wasn't here when the man papered that side."

"Tear it down, men," O'Grady ordered. Every man had his hand in his coat pocket, with gun clutched tightly. "And let me remind you, Mr. Harrington, this place is surrounded."

"Okay . . . Marcotti!" Doremus snapped.

Stan Dvorak thrust the muzzle of his gun through the closet door and fired a single shot. Marcotti's hands flew into the air as the bullet struck him and the machine gun clattered down the stairs.

Doremus and his men jumped to the conclusion that a detective had fired the shot. All except the leader dropped to the floor to give Chopper in the closet a clean sweep. Doremus was sneering in O'Grady's face as the latter covered him with an automatic pistol. Then he went for his own gun.

O'Grady fired and Doremus sneered

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again. "Now it's my turn, Captain," he said in a flat voice. "Move in on 'em, Chopper."

Dvorak turned a burst on Doremus. An odd expression came into the man's eyes as a stream of bullets ripped his clothing to shreds. He staggered and the weapon fell from his hand. Slowly he raised his hands. "Chopper, you double-crossing ——"

Stan Dvorak stepped from the closet. "Bullet proof vest, eh?" he suggested as he swept the others with the machine gun muzzle. "I'll raise my sights next time, Doremus."

"Stanley!" Doremus gasped.

"Stan Dv—" began O'Grady, then remembered. "Stanley," he said somewhat lamely. "I'd hardly expect you——"

"Nor did Doremus," Dvorak interrupted. "That's what made it easy. Nobody would give me credit for a little nerve. They're all here but the driver and he's waiting in the garage. You've got the entire Doremus gang, when you get him. If Gale's testimony won't convict them, mine will. But first——"

HE STEPPED to the corner and kicked in the beaver board. Grasping a torn section he ripped it out. Next he pulled the lath away. Chopper's body fell into the room, but they knew by his blazing eyes he was alive and unharmed.

Someone removed the gag and Chopper began to gasp for breath. Perspiration was pouring down his face. "I died a thousand deaths in that wall," he panted. "I died ten thousand deaths."

"We're going to be easier on you than you would have been on Stanley," O'Grady promised. "You're only going to die once."

An ambulance clanged up and men came into the room. "You creased Marcotti," a doctor informed Dvorak. "He'll live."

"To be hanged," O'Grady added.

"Here's the driver," two headquarters men announced, barging into the room with a frightened, handcuffed man between them. "He was all set to take it on the lam. He might have gone away, too. They've got a bullet proof car out there that'll do a hundred and twenty."

"Which is something we've needed a long time," O'Grady declared. "We'll confiscate it along with the guns. And that's all, except getting by the newspaper boys. They're out here waiting. It beats hell how they find out what's going on."

"How'd you do it, Stanley?" one of them demanded, coming into the room.

"There was really nothing to it," Dvorak answered. "Just shorted a wire, blew a plug, and got to the telephone. The operator did the rest. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll use that telephone again."

O'Grady and Doremus heard him say, "This is important. Put Moe Ganz on the wire at once. I know he's a nervous wreck, but I've got a cure for him. Sure, thanks. Hello! Hello, Moe? This is Stan Dvorak. O'Grady's just pinched the mob. I've had a lot of fun and am ready to go to work again. On your bended knees? Well, if you're on 'em, stay there and offer a prayer of thanks. No, not for my safety, but for all the free advertising Doremus gave Gale. Snatchers is box office sure as hell."

"He called himself Stan Dvorak," Doremus muttered. "The man I came to snatch. And I had him and didn't know it."

As a lull came, the announcer's voice came distinctly and freighted with excitement. "Flash! The Doremus mob has just been captured, through the efforts of John Stanley who——"

In a far-away hospital Moe Ganz switched off his radio. "Who gives a damn about how it was done? Don't I know? I esk you didn't I pay for it with flesh and blood worried off by pounds. Stan Dvorak and his detectiving. Phooie!" Then Moe got up and began to dress.

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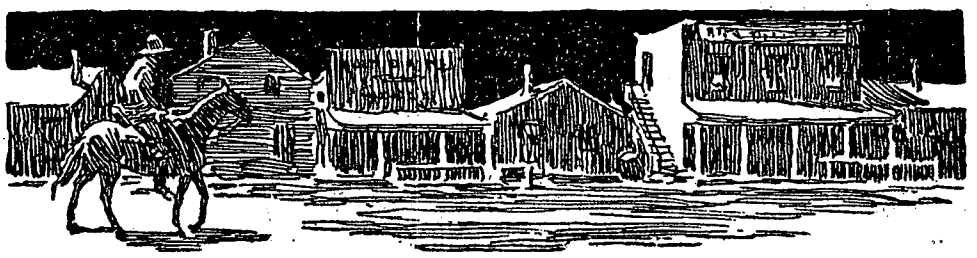
Dog Leg Was a Mining Camp Up Zeno Canyon, With Its Own Ideas of Civic Administration



LUNK-HEAD JOHNSON

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER

IT IS amazing what a little kindness and appreciation will do for a man. There was the case of Lunk-head Johnson, for instance. If ever there was a useless old bum——but listen to his story.

This Lunk-head Johnson drifted into Dog Leg, the mining camp up Zeno Canyon, with a pick and a shovel and a burro and not much else but the need of a bath and a beard like a pirate, and began making a hole in the rock under the impression that he was making a mine. Forty-two or forty-three advisers immediately told him he was a lunk-head to locate his mine where he did; they were right and he never did get anything out of his mine but rock and the name stuck to him. The miners used to say of anyone who was extra dumb, "He's as loony as Lunk-head Johnson."

Dog Leg, away up there at the head of the canyon, was rough and raw, and some of the toughest specimens of male humanity in Nevada were gathered there. Some of the most worthless, too, but by the time Lunk-head Johnson had been there a year he topped them all. He was dirtier and lazier and hairier than any of them. He lost all hope. His mine was no good and he knew it by that time. He had degenerated into a disreputable ragged old snoozer. He was such a bum that Izzy Bernheimer, who ran the Dog Leg store, would not let him loaf in the store.

The second winter Lunk-head Johnson would have starved if Izzy Bernheimer had not let him have a little sow-belly and a few beans from time to time, but Izzy was kind hearted and did so. Old Lunk-head would come into the store and stand around until he had a chance to edge up to Izzy and say, "Now, I ain't got no food up to my shack—" and Izzy would glare at him a minute and say, "All right! All right!" and cut him off a slab of side-meat and shovel him out a parcel of beans.

"You put it down on my account," Lunk-head would say.

"I should waste my ink!" Izzy would say. "All I ask if you should get out from my store as quick as could be, and stay out."

Old Lunk-head would not say another word. He would look at Izzy like a whipped dog and turn and go out with his shoulders bowed. Sometimes one of the fellows in the store would laugh; sometimes one of them would spit on Lunk-head's ragged boots. He never gave a sign; he was an utterly crushed specimen. He would shuffle back to his one-room shack and sit close to his sheet-iron stove. He had hardly enough ambition to keep from starving from one day to another.

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THEN, one day toward the end of winter, Lunk-head Johnson stole a can of salmon from Izzy Bernheimer's shelves. The occasion was the arrival of the stage that ran—sometimes regularly and sometimes not—between Dog Leg and Plasco. This stage was run by Hank Kane and Blister Owens. Hank was a six-footer with a walrus mustache and a weather-worn countenance and gentle blue eyes, and a dead shot with any kind of a gun; Blister Owens was a young fellow of twenty-three or twenty-four. He was a pleasant boy, this Blister, and the general understanding was that he was a younger son of worth-while people back East, roughing it out there in Nevada because he had got into some sort of trouble and because he liked the life. Hank Kane had taken a great fancy to him and they were a queer couple—no one as reluctant of speech as Hank, and no one as boyishly talkative as Blister Owens.

At any rate, the stage got through this day and Hank Kane pulled up his four horses in front of Izzy Bernheimer's store and Blister jumped down and pulled out the mail-bag and hustled it into the store. Izzy was the postmaster and had the post-office in the front of his store near the window—a glass fronted rack of pigeon-holes. He took the bag from Blister and went behind the post-office to sort it out.

Most of Dog Leg usually made a bee-line for Izzy's when the stage came in, crowding the front of the store to see if any mail had come for those who expected some or for those who never did get any, and there were fifteen or twenty in front of the post-office when Dizzy dumped out the bag. Izzy had been doling out sow-belly and beans to Lunk-head when the stage arrived and had just pushed the parcel of beans across the counter, but he left Lunk-head there this time without the usual, "And now get out and stay out."

IZZY had just picked up the first letter from the pile when out of the corner of his eye he saw old Lunk-head's hand reach across the counter and grasp a can of salmon. In almost one motion Izzy slapped the letter on top of the post-office, made a leap, and grasped Lunk-head's wrist. With one hand he jerked the can of salmon away from Lunk-head, and with the other he threw Lunk-head's arm violently back across the counter.

By the time Lunk-head stopped staggering backward a dozen hands had grabbed him. Someone hit him on the side of the face with an open hand. He hunched his shoulders and bent his head, and the next moment he was thrown out into the street on the back of his neck.

"Such a business!" Izzy Bernheimer cried as he went back to the post-office. "A bum he is, and all winter I feed him, and now he is a thief also and steals from me a can salmon!"

There was great indignation in the store. Some of the fellows wanted to go out and lynch old Lunk-head then and there—hang him up and shoot him full of holes—and they would have done it if they had not been waiting for the mail to be distributed. It was a serious case. Lynching was the penalty for any crime in Dog Leg, from theft to murder, and this crime of Lunk-head's was about as mean as anything could be. He had robbed the man who had been provisioning him all winter and, worse than that, he had smashed the generally understood rule that no one was to do anything to annoy Izzy Bernheimer while he was sorting mail.

Izzy was so mad he forgot entirely the letter he had slapped on top of the post-office. He went on sorting the mail and the letter lay forgotten for many days. It was the only letter than had come for Lunk-head Johnson for many months.

THAT evening the informal committee that was all the government Dog Leg had met in Izzy Bernheimer's store to decide what to do about Lunk-head. This committee was made up of what

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might be called the respectability of Dog Leg, the men Izzy allowed to loaf in the store—a rough and ready bunch of whiskered and bearded fellows but no out-and-out murderers—and after a lot of confab and opinion it was decided that, as long as Izzy did not want to press the matter, they would not hang Lunk-head but merely kick him out of camp.

They would have kicked Lunk-head out of Dog Leg that night or the next day if Izzy had not put in another plea for him,

"You should listen once," he pleaded. "Winter it is yet, and this Lunk-head he ain't so

healthy, maybe, such a few sow-belly and beans he is eating all winter. Where does he go when we kick him out from Dog Leg?"

"Who cares?" asked One-eye Simmons.

"Maybe nobody," said Izzy, "but it ain't so good that Dog Leg sends out an old feller to die from cold and starving when he don't steal but a can salmon which he don't get away with even. Rather I should make him a present of two can salmon than them fellers at Plasco or wherever finds him dead and says, 'Look once! for a can of salmon them Dog Leg devils let an old man freeze to death.'"

"What you want us to do then, Izzy?" One-eye Simmons asked.

"Kick him out, yes," said Izzy. "For such a bum we ain't got no use in Dog Leg. But we could wait till spring and it don't hurt nobody."

SO THAT was agreed. Lunk-head Johnson became a pariah and an outcast in Dog Leg. Nobody spoke to him, nobody had anything to do with him. There was no jail, but his shack was his jail; there was nowhere for him to go. The old reprobate kept to his shack, waiting for the day when Dog Leg would come and speed him on his way with a kick. And then the thaw came.

The thaw came with a rush. One day it was winter and the next day the warm wind came from the south and the snow began to melt. By the next day rain came. Everything was wet, the road was a river, the canyon creek was a raging river, every gully was a river.

Hank Kane and Blister Owens had gone down to Plasco with their stage before the thaw and nobody expected them to attempt the up trip for two weeks, three weeks or a month, but a week after the thaw they reached Dog Leg. They had borrowed a pair of mules at Plasco, but even with their four good horses and the mules it had been all they could do to get through. The stage was mud from tire to top and their beasts were mud from hoof to ear tip. Twice the stage had overturned; half a dozen times it had stuck in the mud; again and again it had almost gone over the edge into the canyon. But Hank and Blister had fought through. They were all but exhausted when they pulled up in front of Izzy Bernheimer's store. Izzy himself came out front.

"Was you crazy or what, such a road coming by?" he asked as Blister handed him the mail bag. "What comes that you make the trip now? Is it a war or something?"

"There's hell to pay, Izzy," Blister said, wiping a blob of mud off his chin. "We just had to come through. Has Lunk-head Johnson been chased out yet?"

"Not yet."

"Thank God for that!" Blister exclaimed.

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THE stage-greeting crowd was gathering and the questions began but Blister cut them short.

"Give us a chance, fellers," he begged. "Hank and me are mighty near played out. Leave us get some mud off us and some grub into us."

Hank Kane put in his plea for a chance to get cleaned up and fed, too. He turned his animals over to a couple of the men, begging them to feed the beasts and rub them down.

"We won't take no longer than we have to," Hank said. "We didn't bust through all that mud to waste time when we got here. Give us half and hour——"

"An hour," said Blister. "I'm going to eat for half an hour."

"Give us an hour," said Hank. "And them of you that wants to do what is right and proper meet us here in Izzy's store. And fetch Lunk-head. That's who is the meat in this nut—Lunk-head Johnson."

An hour later they were all there. The store was so crowded with the manhood of Dog Leg that men not only sat on the counters but stood on it. In a choice location close to the stove old Lunk-head sat in a chair, close guarded by One-eye Simmons and Snap Canahan. The old man was slumped down, indifferent to his fate, his eyes closed. He did not care what happened to him now. Lynching or being kicked out were all the same to him.

Hank Kane and Blister Owens came in from Billy's Star Restaurant and pushed their way through the crowd to the stove where Izzy Bernheimer was standing. Hank was pulling the end of his walrus mustache and Blister was rubbing the back of his neck as he did when serious and thoughtful, and both had the countenances of men who have heavy business on hand and know it. The men around the stove made room for them.

"You tell 'em, Hank," Blister said, and Kane looked at old Lunk-head a moment and then at the crowd.

"Well, boys," he began slowly, "I reckon you know mighty well that me and Blister wouldn't be dumb fool enough to try to yank that stage through from Plasco in a thaw if there wasn't a reason for it. We might have come through and we might be down there in the canyon somewhere, the both of us dead. The chances was just about even. We took them chances and we're here."

"We had to get here," said Blister. "There wasn't no two ways about it."

"Because," said Hank Kane, "it seems like that when we got down to Plasco there was a girl there—a young female girl. She had come into Plasco on Ben Hurley's stage, and she was waiting there for me and Blister to come with the stage and fetch her to Dog Leg."

"But we didn't fetch her," said Blister.

"No, sir," agreed Hank Kane. "We didn't do so. God and this here thaw gave us a chance to say we wouldn't fetch a female lady up this canyon on no account till the road cleared up. We said it was death for a female to chance it—and so it might well be. So said one and all at Plasco which she appealed to."

"So me and Hank come on through alone," said Blister Owens.

"Because," continued Hank, taking a chew of tobacco from his plug, "we wasn't going to fetch this Marjorie Manners to Dog Leg until we put the proposition to you fellers and see what you wanted to do about it."

AT THE mention of Marjorie Manners old Lunk-head raised his hair-tangled head and looked at Hank Kane. His hand came up and clawed at his whiskers, and he opened his mouth as if to speak, but Hank Kane was going on.

"Miss Marjorie Manners, that's what her name is," Hank said, "and the hell of it is, fellers, she says she's the niece of this Lunk-head Johnson here, and I got to believe it. She told us as how her ma had died, which was this old snoozer's sister, and how this Lunk-head is the only folks she has got."

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"She was coming up to live with him, and do for him in his shack," said Blister Owens. "Uncle Peter she calls him, and says he's a miner and likely prosperous, seeing as he used to send money home to his sister once, till his sister didn't need it no more."

"And, gents," said Hank, "human heart couldn't bear to think of that nice sweet girl coming up here and finding that her Uncle Peter was a dirty old busted bum on the edge of being kicked out of camp. Human heart couldn't stand to think of it."

"Not when she was that kind of a girl," said Blister Owens. "She ain't no mining camp kind. She ain't no wind-dried female like them at Plasco. She's like a little tender rose, fellers."

"Like a mayflower, more, Blister," Kane corrected him. "She ain't got a thorn nowhere. Sweet, that's what she is. And tender. Gentle. And full of hope and gladness that she's going to be with her Uncle Peter—the ring-tailed old diplodicus yonder."

"We seen it wouldn't do," said Blister. "It would bust her heart wide open."

Izzy Bernheimer turned to old Lunk-head.

"What you know about it?" he asked.

"Nothing," Lunk-head said. "Nothing. I have a niece and that's her name. I didn't know she was coming. I did not know her mother was dead. I got no word."

Izzy stared at him a moment. Then he slapped his hand to his head.

"Help me, Moses!" he exclaimed. "A letter comes, sure enough. In my hand I have it when this feller steals a can of salmon. I put it—Ben Fuller, is a letter on top of the post-office yet?"

Ben Fuller, standing on the counter by the post-office partition looked. He found the letter.

"Here," he said. "'Mr. Peter Johnson,'" and he handed the letter to one of the men, and it passed down the line until Izzy handed it to Lunk-head. The old man tore it open. He held it far from his weak eyes and read it.

"It's like you say, Hank," he said. "She's coming. Marjorie is coming. Her ma is dead and she's coming, Marjorie is," and he handed the letter to Izzy Bernheimer. The store-keeper read the letter aloud. No sound disturbed the store as he read. It was an affectionate letter such as a young girl still grieving for her mother would write. Tears stood in some of the tough old miners' eyes as they listened, for no one but an innocent young girl could have written such a letter—a girl unsullied by the sin and harshness of the world these men knew.

WHEN Izzy read the closing words of the letter—"Your loving niece, Marjorie"—his voice trembled and he put one hand for a moment across his eyes. He could not speak. He was too deeply affected. It was Hank Kane, standing by the stove facing the men whose stern countenances indicated their appreciation of the seriousness of the occasion, who spoke.

"Well, fellers," he said, pulling at his mustache, "there's how she is. That's how she stands. I reckon you can see now why me and Blister come busting through to get to Dog Leg before that sweet young innocent girl could get here. Fellers, no human man that wasn't a filthy coyote would want that tender young girl to come here and find her uncle was a low-down no-good salmon-stealing son of a sawbuck like this Lunk-head here."

"No, by criminy!" declared Blister Owens. "It wouldn't be right nor yet decent."

"And that's why me and Blister come through," continued Hank Kane. "That's why we left that young sweet girl there and wallowed up here through that mud and all. We come to give fair warning she was coming, so as you could run this Lunk-head out of camp afore she got here."

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He shook his head emphatically and tugged at his mustache again.

"Or hang him for stealing that can of salmon," he added. "I don't care which so long as we get shut of him in ample time."

"Before she gets here," said Blister Owens, "and gets her heart broke seeing what a cussed old rip he is."

Old Lunk-head had sunk down in his chair again. He heaved a sort of gusty sigh with his eyes closed, and made a futile gesture with his hand as if to say

it was all the same with him. Izzy was still holding the letter.

"Boys," Izzy said, "you have heard what our good friend Hank says."

"Hang the old rooster," someone in the store shouted.

"Run him out of camp," shouted another.

"Hold on, now," One-eye Simmons said. "Where's he going to go if we run the old snoozer out of camp? There ain't no ways for him to go but to Plasco, is there? This here Marjorie is going to meet up with him if he goes there, ain't she? I say string him up and get done with him."

"String him up! Yank him to kingdom-come! Hang him!" men shouted here and there.

"I'm ready, boys," Lunk-head said. "It don't make no difference to me. I'm nothing but a played out old wreck with nothing to look forward to. Do what you want to."

"A trial!" someone shouted. "Give him a trial right here and now and get shut of him. One-eye Simmons be judge."

"I'M RIGHT pleased and honored, boys," said One-eye Simmons. "This here court of Dog Leg will come unto order, and let us proceed all neat and orderly. Lunk-head Johnson, you are at this here bar of justice for to be tried according to the rules and regulations as upheld in Dog Leg off and on and more or less. You are accused of—what's he accused of, fellers?"

"Stealing," said one of the men. "He went and stole a can of salmon from Izzy whilst Izzy was sorting the mail."

"Izzy Bernheimer will give testimony and testify to the crime as named and stated," said One-eye. "Did this here old wallopus steal a can of salmon from you, Izzy?"

"No," said Izzy. "He don't steal nothing from me. Maybe he picks up a can salmon but I don't know does he only want to look at the picture from fish on the label or what. He don't steal no can salmon."

"Now, hold on!" said One-eye. "This here trial ain't going to get nowhere if he ain't stole nothing."

"Well, I got to tell it the truth, ain't I?" asked Izzy.

"Why, sure, sure!" One-eye said. "Ain't he stole nothing from you?"

"Nothing."

"Well, boys," said One-eye, "it looks like that crime wasn't no crime. Has anybody got any other complaint of crimes or misdemeanors to make against this here Lunk-head Johnson?"

No one spoke up. There was no crime to charge Lunk-head with. Crimes and misdemeanors—unless he had indeed meant to steal the can of salmon—were not his trouble; his trouble was poverty and discouragement. One-eye Simmons waited a minute or two; he did not know what to do. He scratched his ear.

"Lunk-head Johnson," he said then, "this court declares you free and guiltless of the crime you was hereby charged with, and I'm cussed sorry for it." He scratched his ear again. "Boys," he asked,

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"what in tunket are you going to do with the old geezer now?"

Some called out, "Hang him!" despite the verdict, and some shouted, "Run him out!" but Izzy Bernheimer and Hank Kane and Blister Owens had their heads together.

"You should wait a moment," Izzy said to the crowd, and went on with his confab with the stage driver and Blister. They called One-eye Simmons into the consultation and the four talked and seemed to reach an agreement. One-eye faced the men of Dog Leg again.

"Well, boys," he said, "the four of us here have had a talk together and—seeing as there are more of the men of Dog Leg here than mostly gets together at one time—Izzy here says to put a proposition up to you. This here camp has been going along sort of hit-and-miss without no organization, and it's about time we got organized and was something. Will somebody make a motion that the Town of Dog Leg be and is organized?"

The motion was put and carried with cheers.

"The next thing," said One-eye, "is to elect a mayor of this good and growing metropolis of Dog Leg. We've got to have a mayor that can give time to seeing this town is cleaned up and kept all nice and respectable and so that the citizens are decent and respectable likewise. And the first thing the mayor has got to do is to handle this here case of Lunk-head Johnson."

"I move that Dog Leg have a mayor," said Hank Kane, "and that he do like you say, and that he be paid fifty dollars a month for doing it."

THE motion was carried with a yell.

"I nominate Izzy Bernheimer for mayor," some man shouted, and the whole crowd seconded the nomination enthusiastically. Izzy held up a restraining hand.

"Gentlemens," he said, "I got it in my heart a feeling I could not tell you to have such an honor like you would give me. But I couldn't do it. I got me my store what takes all my time, and I was postmaster already and could not your mayor be. Also we got it here a man has time to do the job, what ain't got no mine worth nothing. I nominate this, now, Lunk-head Johnson."

"Second that nomination," said Hank Kane and Blister Owens in unison.

"And I'll let him have a suit of clothes and pair of shoes and a couple shirts which he pays when he gets his salary also," said Izzy. "He ain't no such bad feller, this Lunk-head, only he got it such bad luck."

"You heard the nomination," said One-eye Simmons. "All you that wants this Lunk-head made mayor, and cleaned up, and fixed so this Marjorie niece of his'n won't be all-cussed ashamed of him, say so."

They said so with another yell. For a minute or two old Lunk-head seemed dazed. Then he stood up and he was like a new man. He held his head high, and threw back his shoulders, and his eyes shone with the light of pride and new hope.

"Boys!" he said, and his voice choked with emotion. "Boys! Fellow citizens ——"

He could not go on. He struggled for words.

"Boys," he began again, "I'll make a good mayor for you. I'll——"

He stopped again. Hank Kane was patting him on the back. Blister Owens was shaking his hand.

"Boys——" said old Lunk-head again.

"Quiet!" Izzy called. "The mayor was going to say something."

"Boys," said old Lunk-head, "who'll loan me a dollar? I'm going to get me a shave and a hair-cut."

The regeneration of Lunk-head Johnson had begun.

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JUNGLE LOOT

By CARL N. TAYLOR

Author of "Tabu Gold," "Too Dumb to Live," etc.

I

A CAMP fire fed with soggy wood smoked and sputtered beneath an overhanging ledge in the midst of the jungle. A man with a bloody bandage around his head lay beside the fire, alternately groaning and mumbling. A few feet away a second man sat with his shoulders braced against the damp cliff—Captain Arlus McDougal, flight commander, A Squadron, U. S. Army Air Corps, Manila station. Using his knee as a desk, he was writing in a soggy notebook.

"Somewhere between Baler Bay and Cape Engaño, N. E. Luzon," he had written. "August 1. Situation unchanged. Easterly baguio still blowing, with terrific downpour. Clouds lowering, all landmarks obscured. Lieutenant Shadburn appears to be regaining consciousness. Visited wreck of plane this morning. Found a bullet hole in tank, three in wings, several in fuselage. No sign who shot us down."

Snapping his notebook shut, McDougal spent several minutes staring fixedly into the darkness.

Thirty-six hours ago he and Pat Shadburn, his observer, had flown across the Mamparang Mountain barrier, winging northward over unmapped country. After taking a few photographs of that inhospitable coast, they had started back to Manila, skimming low over nameless mountain ranges. Suddenly Lieutenant Shadburn had leaned forward to shriek into McDougal's ear:

"Bullets!"

"Eh?"

"Someone flinging lead at us!"

"You're crazy," McDougal had yelled back. "Nobody down there but headhunters."

"Don't tell me! I know the bullet tune. What d'ye think I was doing overseas in the Big Show?"

And then it had happened. With jungle-choked gorges yawning beneath, their motor had suddenly died. McDougal had pancaked into a thicket of mountain bamboo, gambling that the springy growth would absorb the crash. Himself half stunned and Shadburn unconscious, McDougal had retrieved their two rifles and pistols, with bandoliers, which were part of regular equipment of planes flying

Two Army Airmen Think They Are on Routine Patrol in the Philippines—but the Fates Decide Very Much Otherwise

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over this inhospitable district. He had then turned his attention to Shadburn. Events after that were badly blurred in his memory. Somehow, though he had no distinct recollection of it, he had carried Shadburn to the shelter of this ledge.

What had happened to their plane? Like a fragment of a dream, he recalled Shadburn's words:

"Bullets! Someone flinging lead!"

ABSURD? Impossible? On the face of it—yes. They had been flying over a jungle area that had never been seen by whites except from the air; a forbidden region shut in on one side by the Mamparang and Caraballo Mountain masses, on the other by the uninhabited Pacific Coast. A no-man's-land populated by a few hundred, perhaps a few thousand, naked savages. Who would be shooting at them from that wilderness?

For several hours after the crash there had been no time for speculation. Shadburn appeared to be badly hurt. To make it worse, the sky had suddenly become overcast, the air murky and sultry. McDougal knew what those signs meant. Somewhere out in the Pacific a typhoon was brewing. Within an hour the first brief gale had struck and passed, to be followed by others with mounting fury. The wind had come in howling gusts that started with low saxophone moans and ran the scale to caliope shrieks. Thunder pounded the high peaks. Lightning stabbed into the valleys, water sluicing down as though some heavenly dam had burst. After twenty-four hours of this Shadburn was still unconscious. McDougal now faced the fact that no searching planes could be expected.

Leaving Shadburn, he made a trip back to the wrecked plane. It proved well worth while. Not that it threw much light upon the mystery—it didn't. But it left no doubt as to the cause of their crash; bullet holes through the wings, fuselage, and gas tank of a wrecked plane are pretty convincing evidence.

Hence the coldly serious expression in his eyes as he reviewed the entries he had made in his notebook.

"Nigger in the woodpile somewhere," he muttered. "What's he doin' there? Nothing very savory, I'll be bound."

He was sure of one thing; the shooting had not been done by natives, who were bow and arrow people—pygmy Negritos and a few scattered settlements of black bearded headhunters of a distinctly Papuan type. More wary than animals, they stayed hidden in their forest haunts and never ventured out to the trading posts. They had no guns. Moreover, no wild man could hit a moving plane.

"Which puts it up to some criminal outfit," McDougal mused. "Some gang out for big stakes. Big time stuff. But what the hell? Criminal syndicates belong in cities—at least within reach of civilization. What kind of a game could they be playin' in this god-forsaken jungle?"

This was a question for which there seemed to be no answer.

II

DAWN. Dark brown clouds hanging moodily between the peaks. A steady downpour of rain. The roar of distant streams, swollen to torrents. A gray, chill atmosphere, dank with the smell of vegetable mould. A jungle from which all living things appeared to have fled.

McDougal got up, blew life into the fire, piled on fresh wood. Shadburn was snoring. Bending over his lean, sprawled form, Mac felt his pulse.

"He's coming out of it," he grunted.

Picking up his rifle, he walked into the forest. He hunted for an hour and then, about to return empty-handed, he saw an old gray monkey squatting on a log. He shot the monkey and carried it back to camp.

Shadburn was awake and sitting up.

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He waved his hand, a little shakily, as Mac climbed the hill.

"Nimrod returneth from the chase," he greeted. "What? The hunter seems to have slain one of his relatives!"

"Shut up. You're going to eat it and like it."

Mac squatted on his heels and began to skin the monkey. Shadburn stood looking on. Glancing up, Mac noticed that he was swaying on his feet.

"Better squat, laddie-buck."

"What happened to us?" Shadburn asked. "I can't get the kinks out of my brain. Did we get shot down? Or was that something I dreamed?"

"You didn't dream it."

Shadburn whistled.

"Dammit, Skipper, that doesn't make sense. There isn't a war on, is there? Who would plug us in this jungle? What could be the object? And what became of the birds who did it?"

"Ask me a few more, why don't you? I don't know. After we crashed, I lugged you away and found this ledge. I went back yesterday—you've been out about thirty-six hours in case you don't know it—and what did I find? Bullet holes all through the crate. Fifty calibre dum-dums at that, if I mistake not!"

"One would conclude," Shadburn said, "that there's something hereabouts that someone doesn't want us to see."

"Aye—but what and why? Here's the way I dope it out—timber thieves. There's been talk that Japs from Formosa have been raidin' the forests on the east coast. It's entirely probable. If they want timber, what's to stop 'em? No towns on this side of the island. No constabulary patrols. And the Gov'ment revenue cutters are too busy with opium smugglers down south to get up here more than once a year. We probably happened to fly over one of their lumber camps. Somebody got excited and potted us."

"Wrong," Shadburn said. "It's something bigger than that, though I'm not saying it isn't a Jap enterprise."

"Got a better theory?"

"It isn't the usual thing, is it, to use dynamite in logging operations?"

"Eh?"

"While you were off hunting monkeys, I distinctly heard several blasts go off."

"I," said Arlus McDougal, "will be damned!"

HAVING dressed the monkey, Mac busied himself contriving a spit for roasting the meat. This done, he looked sharply at Shadburn.

"Maybe it was thunder you heard. Or my rifle. I shot a monkey, you know."

"It wasn't thunder," Shadburn said positively, "and it wasn't your gun. I heard that, too."

Before Mac could reply, two dull explosions shook the ground. They were

followed directly by two others. The men looked at each other.

"Does that sound like thunder?" Shadburn asked.

"It was dynamite, all right," Mac replied grimly. "Somewhere in this canyon, too. Down toward the mouth, I should say. Did ye not feel the concussion?"

Shadburn nodded. "What d'ye make of it?"

McDougal said, "Something that has no right to be, I'll wager. As soon as I put away a monkey steak, I mean to find out."

"Good. I'll go along."

"No; you're not up to it yet, lad. I'll go alone."

"To hell with that! I'm no invalid. I'm going with you."

"Must I remind you," Mac said, "that I'm your superior officer?"

"You never pulled that one before,"

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Shadburn complained. "I think it's a punk idea myself. This is a two-man job. You don't know what you may walk into."

"Which is exactly why I'm going alone," Mac explained. "I saw a division wiped out in France once because a Frog general thought he didn't need reserves."

III

SHADBURN sat beside the fire, a prey to bitter thoughts. Mac had been gone more than four hours. He had promised to be back in less than two.

A series of heavy explosions broke into Shadburn's thoughts. His body stiffened. He listened intently, but the sounds were not repeated.

In the stodgy jungle silence those explosions were more suggestive of evil than an outburst of savage drumming would have been. Drumming might have been startling, might even have inspired dread, but would not have seemed unusual. Those shots, coupled with what had already transpired, hinted at some desperate business entirely out of place in this setting.

All of a sudden Shadburn became aware that his hands were tightly clenched; that his body was tense; that he was, and had been for some time, strangely alert. It came to him then that he was being watched.

Nothing had moved within his range of vision. Somewhere off across the valley a toucan was emitting sounds like a man coughing away his life in the last stages of tuberculosis. The rain was still monotonously dripping. These things were as they had been before; yet in some subtle fashion everything had changed. There was something out there, not many yards away, that had not been there five minutes ago.

Shadburn got up and replenished the fire. He cupped his hands and caught a drink of water. He moved about aimlessly, as it would have appeared to anyone watching him, but when he stopped he was within reach of his rifle.

He waited five minutes and nothing happened; not a sound or a suggestion of sound came out of the jungle—except, of course, the dripping of water and the squawking of the toucan.

Picking up his rifle, he stepped out into the rain, half expecting the thicket wall to blaze forth fire, to feel a blast of lead rip into his body.

He moved down the hillside to the valley floor. Even on a bright day it would have been twilight down here; today, at twenty feet away, nothing was discernible.

Moving cautionsly, he worked his way through the tangle. His feeling of being watched had now become a moral certainty. He knew, instinct told him, that every step he made was being duplicated; that for every movement of his body, other bodies moved; that keen eyes were watching him.

His rifle cradled easily in the crook of his arm, he increased his alertness. Presently, he felt sure, he would glimpse a target, and then——

Off to his right a dead stick snapped. Whirling, he glimpsed a moving blur. A bush trembled as though shaken by a gust of wind. A shower of water rattled down.

His rifle went to his shoulder. He fired twice at that shadowy figure. The damp air muted the reports until they sounded hardly louder than firecrackers.

Silence.

He leaped forward and parted the bushes. An oath broke from his lips. Owner of half a dozen medals for expert marksmanship, he had missed a man at point-blank range.

A slight movement behind him caused him to whirl around.

He saw that he was caught.

A dozen naked men, grouped in a semicircle, were looking him over. They stood hardly more than waist high to him. Their teeth had been filed to sharp points,

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their bodies covered with cicatrices and scar patterns. Too late, he realized that he had been attempting to stalk a group of men whose knowledge of woodcraft, handed down from the very beginning of man's span on earth, is not approached by any other tribe. Pygmy Negritos!

Armed with spears and barbed lances, three of which were touching his breast, they were in position to dictate terms. One of them reached out and seized his rifle. Glancing at that circle of brutal, ape-like faces, he made his decision; he would not throw his life away just yet. He would play their game.

One of the pygmies pulled his arms behind him, and his hands were quickly tied with a length of vine. This done, they started up the valley, walking in single file with Shadburn in the middle.

IV

SEVERAL more blasts jarred the earth as McDougal made his way down the canyon. Bent low, he wormed his way through the undergrowth. Once he heard voices. Dropping to the ground, he spent several minutes trying to locate them, but he was never quite sure of the direction from which they came. Crawling forward again, he came presently to a trail that led into a narrow side canyon.

He suppressed a whistle of surprise.

A terriffic amount of labor had gone into the making of that trail. Trees had been cut down, boulders rolled aside, steps cut in ledges of rock. Evidently, neither time nor expense had been spared.

"Perfectly clear now," he muttered, "what they're up to. Aye—perfectly clear."

Moving quickly away from the trail, he was scarcely hidden when a strange procession came down from above. He felt a hot surge of anger. Of the seven men in the party, five were Negritos, bent under heavy burdens and fastened together with neck chains. The other two were Japanese coolies armed with rifles, pistols, and bayonets.

"Movin' down to the coast with their loot, eh?" Mac muttered savagely. His fingers itched to shoot down those scowling guards and unchain their captives.

He was about to move on when the clanking of chains again warned him. Three more parties passed, and half an hour slipped by before he was able to move.

His eyes grew narrow and cold. Twenty-five pygmy slaves bent under burdens of the type slaves have carried on the back trails of the world since the dawn of history. Gold! Mac licked his lips. Here was stuff for international complications! The sheer audacity of the thing was stunning.

When the last of the *cargadores* had passed, he moved up the canyon. Presently he came to a narrow defile where the trail took up all the room. This meant a stiff climb and a troublesome detour through the jungle. Two hours passed before he reached a place where he could look down into the canyon.

He uttered a grunt of amazement. The thing *was* big!

On the opposite side of the canyon a tunnel gaped under a cleverly arranged screen of vines. The absence of a dump was hard to account for until he saw that the debris from the tunnel was being carried in baskets and spread among the trees. Several huts were hidden below the workings. Failing to see anything resembling a stockade, he guessed that the forced laborers were quartered underground.

A few yards below him there was a ledge which promised a view into some of the buildings. Although the descent would be hazardous, he decided that the risk would be justified.

Having worked his way down almost to the ledge, he suddenly encountered obstacles that he had failed to see from above. The cover that he had counted on to shield him had thinned out, and

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he saw that he would have to cross a steep slope of shale. A misstep here would be serious.

PARTIES of Negrito slaves were passing in and out of the mine under guard. Watching his chance, he started across the exposed shale.

He was halfway across when a coolie came out of one of the huts. Mac froze. By imperceptible movements, he slid his rifle into the hollow of his arm. Eyes narrow and cold, he watched the man below. The fellow was walking toward the tunnel. A few more steps and his back would be toward Mac—but it was not to be.

Somewhere on the cliffs above a monkey chose that moment to leap from one dripping branch to another. The coolie looked up quickly, and Mac knew that he had been seen. Raising his rifle, he glanced along the barrel; then quickly lowering it, he put his hand over his mouth. The coolie took the hint. For an instant they were stalemated. Mac began to inch his way backward. It was slow going over that slippery shale, and the Jap was beginning to shift from one foot to another. Then Mac missed his footing and fell.

Yelling shrilly, the coolie bolted for the mine. Mac spent the next fifty seconds in a desperate scramble back to partial shelter in the bushes. Before he could gain his objective a mob of Japanese stormed out of the tunnel.

Lying flat on the ground, he saw one of the Japs point toward him. Instantly a dozen rifles came up in perfect military precision. He wasted no more time in fancied concealment. With bullets snapping around him, he scrambled to temporary shelter behind a boulder. Having established himself in some measure of safety, he took account of the odds against him.

There was some excitement below, but it was far from bedlam; rather it was the ordered excitement of disciplined men. The riflemen seemed to be taking orders from a portly figure with a mustache, very stiff in polished boots, linen shorts and pongee shirt.

Presently this individual barked a decisive order. Up came the rifles. Mac pulled his head down. For the next two minutes his rock shelter was tattooed by a storm of lead. When the riflemen stopped to reload, he pushed his own Springfield over the top of the bouler and raised his body slightly.

"You asked for it, Fatty!"

VERY deliberately, he drew a bead on the commander's paunch and squeezed the trigger. The fat man appeared to suffer a sudden attack of colic, then toppled over. Firing rhythmically, decisively, Mac swept the line of riflemen. When his magazine was empty, the line had disappeared. None remained in sight, that is, except Fatty and four of his men who lay sprawled in limp, grotesque attitudes.

"Five that won't put up any more argument. Wonder how many more there are."

Leaving that question to be answered in the future, Mac climbed the cliff and started back to rejoin Shadburn.

"From now on," he muttered grimly, "it'll be a hide and seek proposition. And a sad end for Mrs. McDougal's son if he makes a slip!"

An hour later he reached camp and discovered Shadburn's absence. He lit his last cigarette. Having smoked it until it burned his lips, he walked to the edge of the bush. Frowning, he considered their situation. Night was coming on. In all probability, the Japs were already combing the jungle. As minute after minute dragged by, he felt a growing alarm for Shadburn.

Presently he risked a tentative shout. He was about to call again when a slight stir in the bushes riveted his attention. It was such a stir as might have been made by a dormouse, a lizard—or a very

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stealthy man. He waited, alert and tense. The sound was not repeated.

"Nerves," he grunted.

Presently the bushes moved again. This time he knew it was not imagination. He was staring into the muzzle of a shotgun protruding from a mass of tangled vines.

Trapped!

Lips tight, he watched the gun, meanwhile keeping his hands away from his holster. He knew that he couldn't beat the drop against a shotgun at ten foot

range. Still—if the owner of the gun should move—there might be a chance. The next instant the bushes parted at his right and left, and two coolies stepped into the open. Facing facts in the form of a triple drop, he slowly raised his hands.

V

SHADBURN'S captors had not molested him; this, he gathered, was simply because they were fully occupied in scouting their way through the forest. That they feared pursuit was indicated by the pains they took to hide their trail. At length they reached a camp consisting of a dozen poorly constructed lean-to shelters concealed in a jungle-choked ravine. Underneath a thatched shed some of the pygmy women were cooking in a blackened communal pot.

Glancing around the circle of hutches, his first impression was one of squalor and filth rather than savagery. Next, he saw a thing that rooted him in his tracks. In the middle of the clearing a fetish pole had been set up and loaded with the usual trophies of the chase: a python's skin, the tusks and jawbones of wild hogs, antlers of deer, the huge sealing wax beaks of a pair of toucans. To these things he hardly gave a glance; the trophies that caught and held his gaze were two human heads.

With narrowed eyes he stared at the gruesome things.

"Japs," he muttered.

There was little comfort in that. The northeast coast pygmies, he knew, were not likely to draw any distinction between white and yellow.

He had little time just then for further reflection. Bedlam had broken in the camp. The women crowded around him. One white haired old witch, imbued with a hag's lust for torture, seized a stick from the fire and trust the burning end against his body. He bit his lips, but his muscles flinched. Not missing that, the old woman shrieked with glee.

She might have gone on with the torture indefinitely had not one of the males interfered. He came walking out of one of the huts, wearing a battered campaign hat of army issue and nothing else. The hat appeared to be his badge of authority, and Shadburn wondered where he had got it. Shouldering through the crowd, the newcomer clouted the old woman on the head, then turned his attention to Shadburn.

Now it appeared that he had his own ideas of torture. At first he did nothing worse than dance around Shadburn. Spurred by applause, he increased his speed and began to make ferocious grimaces. He seemed to be working himself into a frenzy. Shadburn looked at that circle of brutal faces; like wolves hungrily waiting for the leader of the pack to gorge himself, they were awaiting their turn.

Then, like a dash of water in the middle of a nightmare, something happened that

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put him on his toes, suddenly alert, tense, almost hopeful.

Campaign Hat had stepped back a yard or two and was now giving another exhibition of horrible faces. Stopping in the midst of a grimace, he let one eye-lid drop. Shadburn's body stiffened. Watching narrowly, he tipped a wink in response. The Negrito nodded, almost imperceptibly, and then resumed his facial contortions.

SHADBURN felt a surge of hope. Could he attach any significance to that wink and nod? He wondered. Except for his hat and a better physique, this Negrito seemed no different from the others. His teeth were filed and blackened, his kinky hair matted with dirt, his body covered with scar patterns.

Shadburn's elation passed. What the hell? The beggar probably had no motive whatsoever—meant to convey no message except perhaps one of gloating, didn't even suspect that he had aroused a glow of hope. Thank heaven for that!

At a grunt from Campaign Hat, the American was roughly shoved into one of the hovels. Campaign Hat himself bound him in such a way that he could not move without choking himself with a rattan withe which was diabolically looped around his neck. All the other pygmies having inspected the job, the entire crowd, including Campaign Hat, quickly withdrew.

Darkness came quickly, and with it the end of the rain. Within an hour the sky had cleared and a million stars were brightly twinkling. A lop-sided moon hung low in the sky. Under other circumstances, Shadburn might have felt renewed hope, for good weather meant that rescue planes would soon be winging northward from Manila. That thought did little to cheer him know.

Ten yards away a score of men and twice as many women and children were gathered around the blackened communal pot that the hags had been tending at his arrival. They offered him no food, and he was thankful. He had seen enough to know that they were eating dog meat. Out of his sketchy knowledge of Negrito customs he recalled that the dog feast is a feast of death—prelude to human sacrifice.

FROM where he lay, he could see all that went on. Campaign Hat seemed to be the guiding spirit. When he spoke, the others were silent; when he dipped into the pot, they stood aside.

"Guess I misread his winks," Shadburn muttered. "The beggar must've been tryin' to convey that I am to be the guest of honor at my own funeral."

The gorging ended, Campaign Hat produced several large bamboo tubes which, it soon became evident contained potent liquids. This was a signal for a dance. The fire was replenished with balls of *massiga* gum. In the light of the flames the dancers looked like satyrs. There was no drumming, no accompaniment. Their voices rose and fell in a low, droning sound replete with savagery.

The tempo increased as the crowd began to feel the effects of the stuff they were drinking. A shrill, hysterical note began to creep into their chanting. Their movements became more demoniac, more obscene. But Shadburn was only dimly aware of those changes. His head resting against a boulder, he had allowed his eyes to drop shut. The sound of chanting and stamping feet came to him distantly; he was not asleep, for he was still vaguely conscious of his surroundings—it was as though he had been dosed with some subtle drug.

When he finally sat up the fire had burned down to a bed of coals. The dancing had stopped. Half choked by the noose around his neck, he sat tensely listening. His spine tingled. Blood pounded at his temples. He had heard no movement, yet he was not alone. He could *smell* the presence of a Negrito.

"Sssssss-s-s-s!"

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A hand touched his arm. There was a movement in the dark, and then the restraining noose fell away.

"Not sir to be afraid, my word." He recognized the voice of Campaign Hat. "All sir my people sir sleep plenty damn drunk!"

"Who the devil are you?" Shadburn husked.

"Sssss-s-s-s! Name Tom Damn Fool when eyes sir no see trail for army papa. Name Tome Fine Fella othertime."

"D'ye mean you were a scout for the Army?"

"Much, my word. Army papa Funston him sir name sir because my savvy Aguinaldo trail."

Shadburn suddenly remembered that the chase after Aguinaldo had led deep into the trackless wilds beyond Balete Pass. So old Fighting Fred had used Negrito trailers! The mystery of the battered campaign had was solved.

"Me same sir not like my people," the Negrito went on. "Me much otherwhere with army papa sir my people not educated same like me, you savvy? Elsewhy Tom feel heart make big sir when people bring home you army papa?"

"Yes, I'm an army officer," Shadburn said. "Thank heaven for that. And thank heaven you remembered the uniform, Tom Fine Fellow!"

"Sssssssss-s-s-s-s! Me Tom tie loose sir."

Shadburn felt the man's fingers working with the knotted vines at his wrists. The pressure released, he flexed his arms to restore circulation. The Negrito fumbled with the thongs at his ankles. In another minute he was free.

"Sssss-s-s-s-s. Sir, come."

VI

AT DAWN!"

The Japanese engineer across the polished nagawood table looked keenly at McDougal from underneath drooping eyelids. His fingertips drummed on the brown table top. With coldly formal politeness, he went on, speaking in precise, though slightly hissing English.

"It is most regrettable, this necessity of—er—eliminating you and your comrade. As an army officer you will appreciate that it—the necessity of which I speak—is most obnoxious to me."

Their eyes clashed. The room was full of cold silence. One of the coolies stirred slightly, rattling the cartridges in his bandolier.

"Most unpleasant, but—essential."

"Oh, doubtless." Mac's voice was dry, emotionless. "Somewhat obnoxious to me

as well. Under the circumstances, I'll thank you for a cigarette."

The Jap pushed a box of slender Russian cigarettes across the table, offered his lighter.

"You are a brave man," he observed thinly.

"If my bravery matched your stupidity, I'd be wearing a lot of medals."

"Eh?"

"I could mention several blunders. Shooting down our plane will do for an example. Maybe you don't know that the American Army never stops lookin' for a lost plane till it's found and accounted for."

"Yours will never be found. We have seen to that."

"Maybe not. But that won't stop the search. Some observer will be pretty apt to spot you before they give us up for lost."

The Japanese showed his teeth in a

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smile; the chill smile of a man who knows he is holding trumps.

"Your aviators will see nothing. By the time they arrive we will have perfected our camouflage. It was your misfortune to come before we were ready."

"Your worry, that—not mine." Mac eyed the other narrowly. "Did I understand you to say that you are going to bump off my buddy, too?"

"At dawn."

Mac forced a casual note into his voice.

"Haven't caught him yet by any chance?"

The Jap shrugged. "He will be captured before morning. It is the plan that you shall die together."

Mac grinned.

"You smile?" The Jap spoke with a rising inflection.

"I'm liable to bust out with a horse laugh if you keep on kidding me. Pat Shadburn is on his way to Manila. If he's had any kind of luck, he's floating down the Cagayan River this minute. He'll make Echague tomorrow and telegraph from there. By tomorrow night there will be more planes flying over this neck of the woods than you can shake a stick at!"

He watched the Jap narrowly, hoping to catch some fleeting shadow on those bland, impassive features. He saw nothing of the sort. The man was entirely unperturbed. His face coldly impassive as a death mask, he never moved in his chair.

"That," he said hissingly, "is what you Americans call bluff. It will not save you."

OPENING a drawer, he pulled out a bloody bandage and held it before Mac's eyes.

"Your comrade is hurt. From the appearance of this bandage he has lost much blood. You were searching for him when my men surprised you. You yourself do not know what has become of him. It is entirely possible that he is wandering around in delirium, in which case he will be quickly found. The possibility that he will escape is remote."

Swinging around in his chair, the engineer spoke sharply to the trio of coolies lounging against the wall. They came to attention.

Mac's eyes narrowed. His shoulder muscles tightened. With knees slightly bent, balancing on the balls of his feet, he measured the distance between himself and the man on the other side of the table.

"I advise you not to resist," the Jap said in a flat, deadly voice. "I am holding a cocked revolver."

Mac shrugged and relaxed. The next instant his arms were seized by two of the coolies. The third one prodded the small of his back with a rifle.

"Until dawn," the engineer said, "you will be a guest of the syndicate. I shall order my servant to bring you cigarettes and tea."

Five minutes later Mac was pushed into a windowless storeroom within the mine. Three of the walls were formed of living stone, as was the ceiling, and the fourth wall was of split logs. A carbide light burned in a wire cage fixed to the ceiling. There was nothing in the room that could be used as a weapon. The door was barred on the outside. He knew that the fact that he had been left unbound was itself pretty good evidence that escape was out of the question.

He glanced at his wrist watch. It was ten o'clock; he would have about eight hours.

Outside he could hear droning voices—the guards. Presently there were shuffling footsteps. Mac heard the guards leap up; then the bar was raised on the other side of the door. It was the servant, bringing him a tray loaded with hot sukiaki, rice, sauce, tea, and cigarettes. The engineer was being good as his word.

His men, however, were taking no chances. Two guards came in ahead of the servant. Stationing themselves on op-

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posite sides of the door, they waited until the servant had set down the tray and backed out. The moment he was through the door, they also backed out, jerking the panel shut behind them.

Mac sampled the food. It tasted good, and he took a heavy meal. Having eaten, he leaned against the wall and smoked a cigarette.

In the light of what had already happened, he had no doubt that his captors would carry out the death sentence. As the engineer had pointed out, it was unavoidable. He knew too much. He wondered if his taking off would be a case of plain, brutal murder or a quasi-military execution. Firing squad. Bandage over his eyes. Mercy shot at the end. In any event the Japs would gain their object.

Searching planes would be sent out, of course, but they would discover nothing. Trust the Japs to be prepared against surprise. Barring the slim chance that Shadburn might escape, the mystery of their disappearance would remain forever unsolved. In all probability some Brass Hat would decree that no more planes should be sent beyond the mountain barrier, and the work of looting a virgin lode would proceed unhindered.

AN HOUR slipped by. Mac dozed fitfully, was awakened by voices outside, and dropped off to sleep again. When he woke next time his watch had stopped, the hands pointing at twelve-twenty. Lighting a cigarette, he leaned against the wall. How long had he slept? For all he knew, it might be near dawn.

He began moodily to wind the watch. Suddenly he stopped and jerked himself erect. The next instant he was across the room. Something was happening on the other side of the door! He heard a scuffle, a groan, and then Shadburn's voice.

"Mac—are you in there?"

"Aye—but don't take my word for it. Open the door and see for yourself!"

The door swung open and Shadburn stepped inside. The two guards lay sprawled on the tunnel floor, quite dead. Shadburn handed Mac one of their rifles.

"Brace yourself for a scrap, old man. I was seen working on those chaps."

They raced toward the tunnel mouth. Too late! Men came flooding out of the barracks in the canyon. Voices shrilled. Presently someone took command. There was a momentary pause; then a decisive order was rapped out and a disciplined mob came swarming up the hillside.

VII

THEIR situation well nigh hopeless, Mac and Shadburn took cover behind a pile of boulders.

"We'd better do our talking now," Mac said. "How'd you happen to drop in?"

In a few terse sentences Shadburn told of his experiences with the Negritos.

"Tom Fine Fellow took me back to camp. You were gone, and I smelled a rat. Tom sniffed around and found some tracks. I talked him into showing me the way over here, but that was the end of his help. He skinned out—evidently didn't want to get involved."

"You should have let me go to the devil," Mac said moodily, "and high-tailed it across the mountains with a report."

Shadburn uttered a short laugh.

There was no time for further talk. Protected by excellent cover the Japs were scrambling up the slope. In another instant they were piling into the tunnel.

"Now!"

Mac shot the nearest one. In the dead air of the tunnel the reports of the rifles blended into a continuous roll of fire. There were yells, then screams and groans as the foremost men fell. At point-blank range the airmen did not miss.

His gun empty, Mac reversed it and brained one of the coolies. Those who had begun to waver now surged forward; the mouth of the tuunel was filled with them. Shadburn cut loose with his pistol. Again they wavered, and again they came bounding in, led this time by a coolie who

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brandished a bolo. Shadburn shot him between the eyes and turned his flaming automatic upon the others. Their morale shattered, they ran for cover.

"Keep your head down," Mac warned. "They'll start throwing lead pretty soon."

The soundness of this advice was proved a few seconds later. At first the angle of fire was so acute that most of the bullets struck the tunnel roof, ricocheting harmlessly. Then some of the snipers decided to try their luck from the cliffs. With bullets flying into the mine from all angles, the positions of the Americans became untenable.

"Dispute's getting warm," Shadburn grunted. "What d'ye think of retreating a few yards?"

Before Mac could answer a burst of

shots came out of the darkness behind them.

"Slave guards," Shadburn remarked. "Now we are in for it."

Mac shot out the nearest carbide light. Then, hugging the floor, he spoke gruffly:

"They've got us in a warm spot, laddie-buck. If I flatten out any more, I'll leave a print on the rock. If you feel the same way I do, we're about to make a run for it."

"Down the canyon?"

"Aye."

"Let's go!"

Mac's hand went out, found Shadburn's, gripped it hard.

"Happy landings!"

CRAWLING out into the open, they paused to locate the snipers. It seemed hardly possible that they could get away. The cliffs offered no possibility of escape. In the daytime a good climber might have reached the top; in the dark it was hopeless.

Mac leading, they inched their way downward. It was impossible to avoid making some noise. When they were halfway to the bottom of the canyon, a rifle blazed directly in front of them. They made a cautious detour. Suddenly, Shadburn gripped Mac's arm.

"Getting gray in the east."

"Aye."

In five or ten minutes they would be without the cover of darkness; in a quarter of an hour the tropical dawn would burst like a suddenly blossoming flower. They would have to be clear of the camp before then.

"Suppose we scoot along," Shadburn suggested.

Darting across an open space, they took cover behind a bush. This safely accomplished, they moved toward another pool of shadow. This nearly resulted in disaster, for there was a sniper concealed in that clump of bushes. Leaping from concealment, he fired almost in Mac's face and was frantically working his rifle bolt when Shadburn killed him. Leaping over the body, they sprinted down the canyon. Behind them, shrill yells burst out. Ahead, they could hear men tearing through the undergrowth. They were cut off.

Just ahead a thatched house loomed darkly.

"Inside!" Mac rasped.

The bush was spewing forth men. They were completely surrounded. As they pounded toward the house the race resolved itself into a battle with gun butts, boots, and fists. A man stuck out his foot and sent Mac sprawling. A second was lost while Shadburn brained the Jap and Mac picked himself up. Then they were bursting into the house.

MAC was a little ahead as they bounded through the door. Suddenly he found himself face to face with the engineer who had passed the death

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sentence upon him. The Jap's white teeth gleamed as he swung his automatic. Mac fired from the hip, and the Jap leaped backward, dead when he hit the floor.

A swarm of men came howling out of the dark. Again the whites poured bullets into massed coolies at such close range that men died with powder burns on their bodies. The few who reached the top of the steps fell back upon their comrades. It was all over in an instant. The Americans held the shack, but they knew they could not hold it long. Already the Japs were spraying the walls with bullets from four sides. His face suddenly ashen, Mac dropped his rifle and leaned against a table.

"Hit?"

"In the shoulder. Doesn't matter now—it's harps for us."

As he spoke a new commotion broke forth outside. There were abrupt yells, a fusillade of shots fired with nervous rapidity, more yells.

"Something doing out there," Shadburn said. "Those last shots didn't come our way. I've a hunch—come here, Mac! Treat yourself to an eyeful of this!"

They looked out upon a weird drama. Above them the peaks were aglow with the reflection of a tropical sunrise, but the bottom of the canyon was filled with shadows. In and out of those shadows men were darting and flitting. Here and there a rifle stuttered nervously, although most of the shooting was over. The canyon was being flooded with ghostly little bolo men, and the Japs, thrown unexpectedly upon the defensive, were proving unequal to the test.

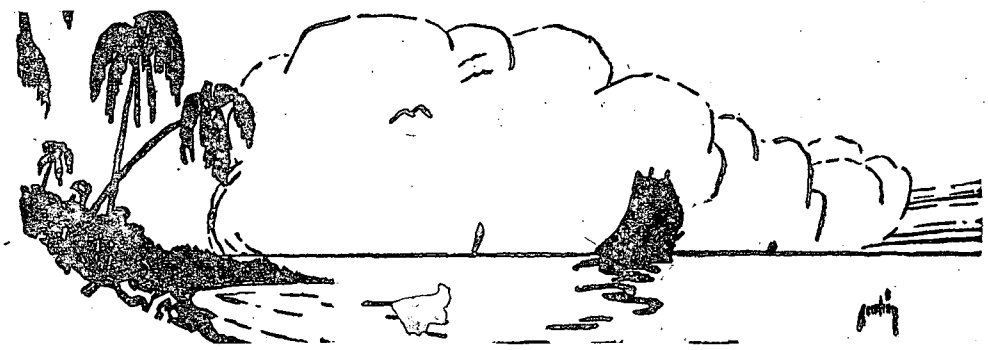
Before that silent horde their discipline shattered. Every yellow man was surrounded by half a dozen pygmies. In the still morning air the screams of men being diabolically maimed attested the savagery of the attack.

In five minutes the first fury of it was over. The Japs who had escaped to the cliffs were being tracked down by men possessed of dog-like trail sense and cat-like cruelty. The rest of the pygmies swarmed into the mine, overwhelmed the guards, and returned augmented by a mob of slaves.

Mac and Shadburn faced a new danger. Crazed by the sight and smell of blood, a group of screeching natives rushed toward the hut. Brandishing spears, they swarmed around the steps. Kicking the leaders back, Shadburn drew his pistol. And then he suddenly jammed the gun back into its holster.

Into that frenzied mob there came a strutting, cocky figure with an army campaign hat slanted on the back of his frizzly head. With blows and grunts he scattered them. Then he climbed the steps. Balancing himself on his right foot, he scratched his shin with long prehensile toes. His thick lips parted. His jagged teeth flashed in a grin of triumph. Carelessly, he swept his right hand toward the brim of his hat.

"Not sir to be afraid, my word. Tom Fine Fella much happy. Eyes sir make to see trail to army papa home!"



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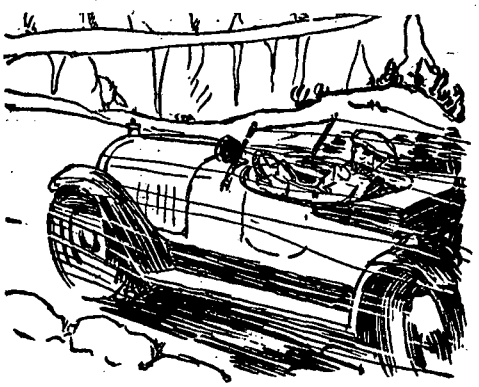

DUST TO DUST

By STANLEY HOFFLUND

BLINDING dust was in the air, blown up from the chalkline hills along the road through the Gap. It was so hot and dry that a drink of water seemed to evaporate before it could get from the canteen to the human thirst tank inside a man.

Alf and Dan Cummings had just finished a job on a ranch well, and as usual they were kidding each other.

"The most useful thing you ever done, Alf," Dan shouted through the rattle of Cactus Carrie, the little truck, "was to connect up the engine of this flivver so she'd run the air-compressor drill."

Alf was driving. He always wore a dreamy smile when he was thinking about machinery and tinkering up things, which was most of the time. There were parts of four broken-down motors in Cactus Carrie.

"Ain't she tuned up pretty?" Alf boasted. "If you call this a tune," Dan bantered, "you must think a b'iler factory is a pianner."

Dan choked on the dust in the air, cussed and added, "I wish you'd get your inventive genius to work on something useful to do with dust."

Fully ten minutes later Alf replied dreamily, "Mebby someday I will. Even dust could be useful—and it shore ain't ornamental."

Dan was the aggressive brother of the pair. It was he who went after the well contracts, and got them; who collected the bills and bullied old Ezra Swain, the banker, into kicking through with loans when financing was needed.

Dan took a big sheaf of currency out of his overalls and started to count the money. There was over a thousand dollars.

"The way these mountain ranchers insist on paying in cash," he remarked, "ain't no compliment to Ezra Swain's bank. They prefer trustin' an old sock hid underneath a mattress. No wonder Snake Hanson and his bunch keep pullin' off their raids up here."

Alf's response sounded nervous. "Better hide that money, Dan."

A sound behind them made Alf turn his head.

"Look, Dan!" he said tensely.

Dan looked. Through the dust haze a big red car had coasted silently down the grade and was almost upon them. Dan crammed the money back into his pocket, which brought a chorus of laughs in four keys from the red car.

"It's Snake Hanson and his bunch!" Dan warned. He started to reach for a rifle, but remembered he had used up all the bullets shooting at tin cans, rabbits and squirrels.

Alf was concentrating all his attention on driving the truck. They were coming into a series of sharp twists and bends in the steeply descending grade.

A shot crashed out behind them, and a little round hole with feathery edges appeared in Cactus Carrie's dusty windshield. Then the first of the sharp bends put them temporarily out of danger.

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"More'n a thousand bucks on us," Dan muttered distractedly, "and not a single danged bullet to shoot back with! All my fault, kid, for amusin' myself with target shootin'. You warned me about it, too."

Dan climbed off the seat and back into the truck. Frantically he started to loosen the bolts that held the clumsy air-compressor tank and machinery.

"I'm a-goin' to cast it off so we'll have a chance racin' down this grade with that big car," he said in reply to something Alf shouted.

"Don't you do it!" Alf called back. "I've got a better scheme."

BEHIND them the powerful red machine showed through the dust faintly whenever there was a long enough stretch of straight road. With each of these glimpses came shots from the bandit car. Bullets whistled murderously close, but the blinding dust and bumpy road made anything like accurate aim impossible for Snake Hanson and his gunners. There were four of them, Dan saw. Snake himself was beside a rat-faced little driver, and in the seat behind them were two more men.

Dan expostulated, "But if we got rid of this here oversized compressor tank and the machinery we might have a chance gettin' away on a mean down-grade like this."

Alf shouted back, and there was no longer anything dreamy in his eyes and voice, "You leave it be, Dan! Cactus Carrie ain't no racin' car even if she's stripped. We wouldn't have a chance after we reach that straight stretch between the gap and the town. I've got a better scheme."

Dan hesitated. Behind them the big red car was roaring through the dust and lurching around the sharp bends in grim pursuit. Bullets kept on coming from her every time the truck offered anything like a target, and now there were three holes in the windshield.

"Maybe we better stop and let 'em have the money," Dan called out. "I don't want to see you drilled fer no thousand dollars, Alf."

Alf's mouth was a stubborn line. "Like hell we'll surrender!" he rasped. "We're goin' to get that money to the bank in town. Like as not Snake'd kill the both of us anyway. What would a few more murders mean in a record like his?"

Dan bellowed, "Keep behind the compressor tank as much as you can, kid." He was keeping behind it, too. Bullets drummed murderously against it, some of them caroming off to whine away viciously into the steep, alkali hills on each side of the Gap road.

The red car hung on tenaciously. But for the curves in the steep grade and the blinding dust, the bigger and faster machine could have overhauled the truck any time her driver wanted to. But the bandit pilot behind her wheel wasn't willing to take too many chances.

Cactus Carrie rattled into the steepest and worst part of the grade. Here the twisting road clung to a chalklike cliff. The outside bank broke off almost sheer from the narrow roadway. There was a

drop of a hundred feet or more into the boulder strewn bed of a dry stream below.

Ahead loomed the worst bend in the grade. Alf could see it through the choking dust. It was lucky the breeze was blowing up the grade, for that made the dust much worse for the pursuing bandit car.

Alf had his hands full with the steering, going at that pace down such a dangerous road. The topheavy air-compressor tank made the truck sway sickeningly.

Alf shouted suddenly, "Toss out the com-

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pressor hose so she trails. 'I'm goin' to connect with the air."

Dan obeyed orders. He didn't know what it was all about, but in the past Alf's inventive genius had never failed them.

Just as Cactus Carrie reached the bend Alf turned a couple of valves on pipes that ran between the air-compressor tank and the truck's motor. Cactus Carrie was accustomed to being stationary, with her wheels blocked and the transmission gears disconnected, when the compressor was operated.

The speeding truck bucked like an infuriated bronco. She swayed and slithered through the dust, which was a foot deep at the bend. It was powdery as talcum and laden with alkali.

The hissing blasts of compressed air from the trailing hose kicked up dust by the ton. It rose in a cloud so thick that no human eye could penetrate it. The driver of Snake Hanson's car, speeding down the steep grade so close behind the truck, didn't have a chance. He jammed on the brakes, but momentum carried the red car down into the bend—the fatal bend.

Curses mingled with hoarse shouts of terror as the red car left the road in that strangling billow of dust which had obliterated all the daylight so suddenly.

There was a crash of mangled steel and shattered glass, then a succession of crashes all the way down the almost sheer drop to the boulder strewn bottom of the dry stream bed.

Alf stopped Cactus Carrie, and hauled the air-compressor hose aboard the truck.

"I told you that even dust could be made useful," he said to Dan.

When they surveyed the shambles that had been a bandit car with a robber crew of four men, Dan muttered in a shocked tone:

"Dust to dust."

In the next* SHORT STORIES—*March 25th

Gold was in the air;
Gold up the treacherous
Forty Mile;
But danger, love, hatred
and ambition
met at———

THE PORTAGE
A powerful
novelette
by
JAMES B. HENDRYX

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The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

The Head Hunters

HERE'S more about the Philippine fastnesses by Carl N. Taylor, author of *Tabu Gold* and in this issue *Jungle Loot*. We do not believe that any other writer of adventure fiction possesses so much first hand dope on our unbelievably little-known and fascinating possessions in the Orient. In a previous issue Mr. Taylor described one of his jungle trips.

"Subsequent trips," he relates, "took me into the jungle fastnesses of the Zambales Mountains where I fraternized with pigmy negritos who had never seen a white man; across the Island of Mindanao from Cagayan Misamis to Cotabato, unaccompanied, at a time when the jungle was seething with unrest and it was necessary for me to accept hospitality and aid from fanatics and outlaws who had prices on their heads (nothing happened); down the lanes of Pampanga on an Easter day when the brotherhood of Flagellantes were scourging themeselves up and down the roads until the air was filled with a thin mist of human blood which dyed my white clothes mostly red while I was taking pictures; a foolhardy climb up the shaggy sides of Mount Mayon to the lip of the fuming crater where no other man had ever stood; and lastly a trip into the unmapped jungle between Casiguran Bay and Cape Engano on the northeast coast

of Luzon. This nightmare region is the last habitat of bona fide headhunters in the Philippines and is populated by nomadic tribes of big men with crinkly black hair and curly beards, much resembling the Australian bushmen. I have copyrighted photographs to prove that these ugly devils out-Tarzan Tarzan in their daily treks through the top layer of the jungle canopy. I talked to one old chap, whose head

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with its long white beard would have been a fine adornment to any headhunter's house, who told me that in his day he had taken fifty human heads (I have this old gentleman's picture, too, among my souvenirs.) With grim irony he explained that since rheumatism had begun to bother him he had found it not only more expedient but more exciting to hunt wild boars. Being a little bit suspicious because I had some soldiers with me, he refused to put his human trophies on display although I spent nearly a week in his large communal house, the guest of himself and his dozen wives. The interior of this smoky abode of savagery was decorated with skulls and jawbones of more than five hundred deer and pigs with gaps here and there showing where he had taken down those other more grisly skulls.

"Someone may ask—why I was messing around in this area? The answer is—gold! Three hundred years ago Fray Alejandro Cacho, militant priest, brought this hostile area into the fold of Christianity, built fifty-six missions, some of the ruins of which I discovered, and converted over two thousand of the world's most treacherous savages only to have them rise against him in a bloody rebellion, which resulted in crushing defeat to the Spaniards, and return over night to the depth of savagery, a status which they still maintain. The reason for this disaster was gold—*tabu* gold! In Fray Cacho's day certain streams of this region glittered with free gold. A horde of riff-raff followed the missionaries into the wilderness to exploit this gold, bringing with them diseases and misery untold. In self-defense the natives rebelled against the white man, his greed and his religion, this being the only instance to my knowledge when a native people in subjection succeeded in throwing off the Spanish yoke permanently.

"Readers, much of that gold must still glitter in the sands of some forbidden stream. For nearly three hundred years no native of that district has worn a gold ornament, but the virgin placer beds must still be there. Before my supplies ran out and it became expedient because of the growing suspicion and hostility of the natives for me to retreat to Bayombong, Nueva Viscaya, I discovered enough colors to stir my imagination to the boiling point. Some day I am going back. Who wishes to go with me?"

—*Carl N. Taylor*

A Bit Thick

ANYONE who can fill his stories with real people who feel that life is an adventure no matter how or where lived will always find a welcome from readers of SHORT STORIES as has Berton E. Cook whose *Thick Weather* in this issue adds to the growing list of coastwise stories that have taken us to sea in the last two years.

"Fog is no pipe dream" along the New England coast maintains the author:

"Persistent fog marked the winter of 1934-5 on downcast waters. It became as inevitable as the boarding house prune. And where the proverbial prunes ran three to the dish, that fog ran three drops to the bucketful.

"Probably the cursedest luck for mariners out of New England is fog anyway. They blame it on the Labrador Current. It comes crawling up the sea on the tail of a cold snap, on the end of a three-day nor'wester or any other time when there's a shift from cold to cussedness in the southern quarters. Last winter, near the end of one of those cold spells so notorious, one towboat led her string of barges around Cape Cod to Boston without seeing the length of his boat in the void out ahead of him. He came in like a ghost in ice.

"They say one farmer down Swan's Island way went out to nail up a thermometer in his tie-up before breakfast and never did find his house again until the wind came offshore. Was it on Beal Island that the lobsterman was painting arsenate of copper on the bottom of his white boat? The story persists that he started at the bow, moved aft, working his brush, and

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In the next issue, SHORT STORIES *for* March 25th

A night of mystery follows introduction to—

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by **Walter C. Brown**

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Bertrand W. Sinclair

THE PORTAGE
James B. Hendryx

MAIN LINE STUFF
William Edward Hayes, *etc.*

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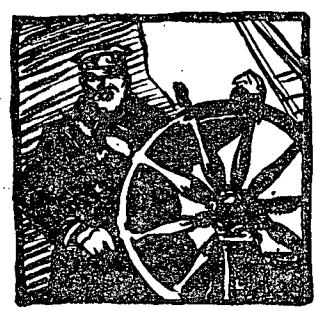
kept on going along the white boat's side. He fetched up by plunging head-first into a tar barrel somewhere up above the shore line about twenty feet away. He'd painted several feet of thick fog red!

"Anyway he didn't shingle himself off the roof of his house into the foggy void like they say was done up in the back country where fish is suckers!

"Those Maine lobstermen can smell a change of weather hours in advance. They scent fog as keenly as certain canines scent game. There was one in particular who could smell out Bay Ledge in the thickest mull that dogdays could furnish. He could sniff out the peculiar fusion of standing firs, piled driftwood and tidewater kelp on one spot along the Placentia shore, too, if the fog gummed his visibility—mind you, with a sternful of malodorous traps aboard of him at that!

"Another fisherman, once he got outside the bay off Sunken Ledge, occasionally caught his end-buoy marker, hooked the warp over the hoisting wheel on the davit



and peered all around at a beautiful, late August morning on an oily sea. A few sniffs, that's all, and up came the entire string of traps to be piled on the stern, along the rails, everywhere.

"'What now, Cap'n?" you might ask.

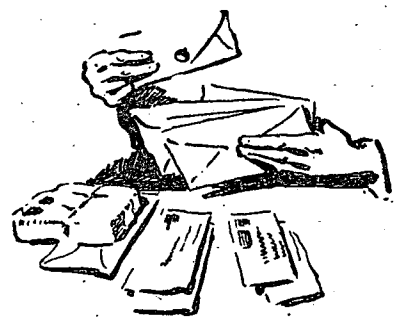
"'We're gonna git some sea fr'm thet hurricane they been havin' to the suth'rd. Gotta shorten these warps and set 'em 'long the lee shore 'tother side o' here,' he replies.

"And that sea came—plenty. Furthermore, he doubled up on his bait-pockets in that string of gear—and got the fog he'd smelled. It kept him landbound for three days.

"Fog is no pipe dream down that way, those fellows know the signs and they know their noses. Yes sir, and their noses know fog."

—*Berton E. Cook*

THE MAIL BAG



"Puppies Perspire," Says Dunn

IN THE last month's S. T. C. we published a letter from W. T. Hall, a man who has "handled all kinds of dogs, both as a professional and an amateur, from Canada to the Rio Grande." He likes Mr. Dunn's stories, but all in good spirit pointed out that Mr. Dunn had his sled dogs in *Broken Trail* getting ice balls between their toes from the frozen sweat, and that dogs don't sweat.

Mr. Dunn's reply printed below is worthy of such a doughty word-wrestler who has built up a well earned reputation for accuracy:

"I have your letter telling me how I am being kidded about the ice between dogs' paws," Mr. Dunn writes us, "and I should like to ask the kidders first of all, if any of them have ever lived in the Mackenzie River basin, as I have, guest of the Mounted inspector for the district. If they have ever been above sixty latitude where it goes below sixty temperature, as I have.

"Many people believe that dogs do not sweat, that they perspire by means of their tongues. I have bred dogs, shown them, judged them and driven them. But let

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me quote the Encyclopedia Britannica rather than give my own observations.

" 'In such animals as the dog which do not perspire *easily* by the skin, respiration becomes important as a loss of heat. *Lying in the sun,* the dog adopts a special type of very shallow rapid respiration, whereby the proportion of air passing into and out of the respiratory passages is great as compared with that which invades the deeper portion of the lungs—hence he can evaporate large quantities of aqueous vapor without working out a corresponding quantity of aqueous vapor. It is *claimed* that by this means his blood may be reduced to a temperature lower than normal.'

"This in the sun, the hot sun, or if overheated by exertion—and lying down.

"With the temperature fifty below zero, with the dogs in continuous motion, that same aqueous vapor would turn to instant hoarfrost or snow powder. And all that *is* expelled comes with his natural breathing as he runs. It covers their bodies with silver frost. When a huskie lies down he covers his muzzle with his tail, he wouldn't try to pant with shallow rapid respiration because he knows what would happen to him. He would ice up, just as a man's breath ices the fur of his parka hood, and his beard.

"But, just the same, the dog is hot after his day's haul—too hot for his absolute comfort. But he doesn't act above the Arctic Circle as he does below it.

"And a dog has plenty of sweat pores and sudoriparous glands, which are deep-seated. This again is not my statement but that of zoologists.

"Let us see for a moment what Dr. Vilhjalmur Stefansson says about sweating—concerning men in the Mackenzie delta.

" 'Shirt and outer coat are made so they hang loosely outside the trousers and come down half-way to the knees. When it is chilly you put on a belt which keeps the warmth in a bit more. If you begin to perspire you take off the belt—open up the neck of the shirt under the skin and allow a cold current of air to circulate up around your body and come out at your neck. Unpleasantly cool, you tighten up the neck of your undercoat again, and the belt.'

"You don't keep bundled up all the time when you are trailing, any more than Eskimos sew themselves into their skins when winter comes. They sleep naked.

"Stefansson again—writing of sailors-whalers—running away from Herschel Island to the interior of Alaska during the Yukon gold excitement 1899-1902.

" 'If you exert yourself only moderately

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

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you will not perspire, but the runaway sailors worked themselves into a sweat, struggled along until they were soaking wet and dead tired, and then finally went into a sleep that ended in death.'

"These excerpts from *Hunters of the Great North*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

"Now, a sled dog exerts itself. Mine were hauling through granular snow, fine as granulated sugar, that does not pack. Their bodies smoked with the heat of their efforts. Their hearts pumped and sent the hot blood through them. Unlike men, they could not open a belt, or a collar. Their furs were hide-tight.

"And they sweated. Don't kid yourselves they did not. Not profusely perhaps but enough to let sudor moisture run down their legs where their paws formed a small dam, through which the sudor trickled between their open toes—moisture enough to turn that granular snow to ice. For it is dry, powdery stuff that will not pack without moisture.

"Believe it or not.

"And dogs have sweaty feet, brother, even as you and I. Now go ahead and laugh.

"Cordially,

"J. Allan Dunn"

Salmon Fishing

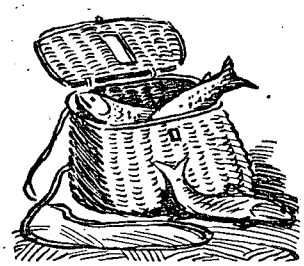
HERE'S a criticism that makes us want to leave our desk and wet a few lines in the wilderness. How about it?

"Editor SHORT STORIES,

"Dear Sir:

"A few months ago I read an article in your magazine (of which I am a continuous reader). The article in question, *Transplanting the Salmon,* by John H. Spicer, related to the Pacific salmon. It stated that the salmon of the Pacific would not take the fly. This is quite a mistake, as there are three species at least that will rise to the fly. The first of these is the steelhead or winter salmon, running in weight from three to ten pounds. This salmon takes the fly very readily. The spring salmon also takes the fly at rare intervals, but the Cohoe salmon that comes into Cowichan Bay in September and October, gives the best sport. This salmon runs from eight pounds to twenty pounds and readily rises to the fly, many boats this season catching their limit per boat. The limit I think is five to the rod per day. I have caught all these different salmon myself.

"The various species of salmon in British Columbia are as follows: Winter or steelhead salmon, spring or Tyee sockeye. Cohoe, humpback and dog salmon. There were Atlantic salmon introduced into this bay several years ago and some more recently. Only one of these salmon has been caught to my knowledge, and this one was captured by the spoon by Andrew



Robertson, Cowichan Bay and weighed over forty pounds. The largest salmon caught on the rod, I think, was taken at Campbell River by Sir Richard Musgrave trolling with a golden spoon. We ordinary fishermen cannot afford to use golden spoons.

"I think I first came in touch with your magazine when I went on a fishing trip and have been a regular reader ever since. I think it was four years ago when it was discovered the Cohoe salmon would take the fly so freely. The bucktail is the favorite. A great many wealthy people now come to Cowichan Bay for salmon fly fishing. There are two good hotels and plenty of boats for hire at Cowichan Bay.

"Yours sincerely,

"William Forrest"

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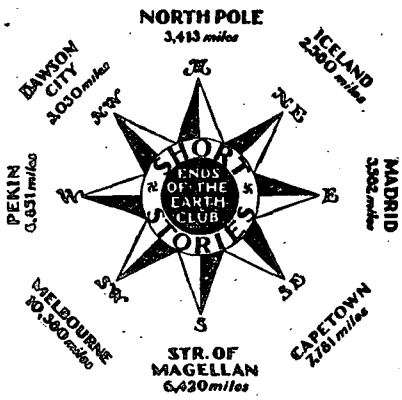
THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Alaskan adventurers attention!

Dear Secretary:

Being a regular reader of SHORT STORIES, I would like very much to enroll in your Ends of the Earth Club.

I have traveled over the greater part of the United States and for nine years lived in Alaska. Would be glad to hear from anyone who has lived in Alaska, or the Northwest Dominion of Canada, or who is interested in the far North. I have also been around the world three times and would be glad to hear from members who have been in China, Japan, or Constantinople.

Yours truly,

F. W. Hillis

1403—2nd Avenue
Oakland, California

Collecting naturalist wants to swap for stamps and postcards.

Dear Secretary:

As an interested reader of SHORT STORIES Magazine for a good many years, I would like to register as a member of the Ends of the Earth Club. I have traveled quite extensively as a collecting naturalist in the United States, Mexico and the West Indies. While in the Bahamas I took considerable trouble to visit the landing place of Columbus on Watlings Island (San Salvador), when he first discovered America, and photographed the landing place and the monument. From these photographs I have had a handsome pair of colored view cards made and will send the pair to any club member sending me a few good stamps, as I am interested in stamp collecting.

Yours sincerely,

Willis W. Worthington

Box 274
Shelter Island Heights,
New York

Readers, scientists, and stamp collectors—a wide variety for this pre-medical comrade.

Dear Secretary:

I'd like to receive letters from members who are interested in all the sciences, books, or stamps. I'd also like to hear from anybody who is interested in starting a long distance correspondence. I am nineteen and a pre-medical student at the Pennsylvania State College.

I've read SHORT STORIES off and on for the last two years and like them very much.

Sincerely yours,

Robert W. Levin

Sigma Tau Phi
211 East Nittany Avenue,
State College,
Pennsylvania

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Kidneys Cause Much Trouble Says Doctor

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Dr. W. R. George

Dr. Walter R. George, for many years Health Director of Indianapolis, says: "Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of much needless suffering with Aching Back, Frequent Night Rising, Itching, Smarting, Burning, Painful Joints, Rheumatic Pains, Headaches, and a generally run-down body. I am of the opinion that the prescription Cystex corrects such functional conditions. It aids in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, and in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Cystex deserves the indorsement of all doctors." If you suffer from Kidney and Bladder dysfunction, delay endangers your vitality, and you should not lose a single minute in starting to take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Sisstex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It starts work in 15 minutes. Gently tones, soothes, and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today.

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Illustration

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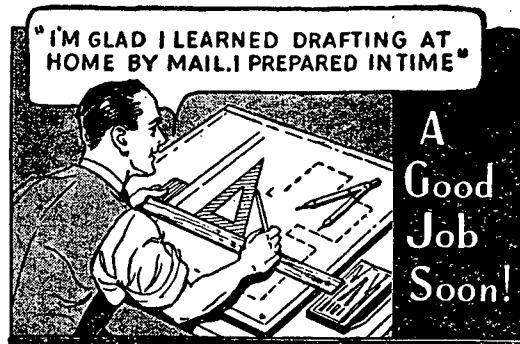

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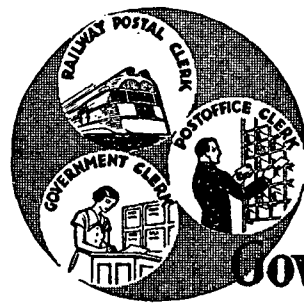

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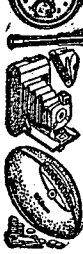

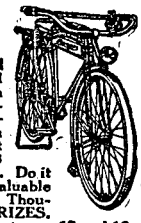

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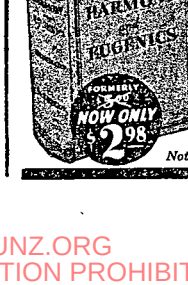

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